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From *Templa* to *Tecta*: Illusionistic Coffered Ceilings and the Construction of Roman Domestic Space

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From *Templa* to *Tecta*: Illusionistic Coffered Ceilings and the Construction of Roman Domestic Space

by

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Thesis

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Abstract

From *Templa* to *Tecta*: Illusionistic Coffered Ceilings and the Construction of Roman Domestic Space

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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Embellishing one's house was an important part of Roman life for the majority of individuals. The evidence from Pompeii reveals that almost all buildings had some sort of painted surface, often of very high quality. Many scholars have hypothesized the reasons for this culture of decoration among Roman domestic spaces. Both ancient literary sources and the archaeological record reveal that houses were of supreme importance to Roman elite self-presentation. Both Cicero and Vitruvius are in agreement that a house is a direct reflection of the personality and status of the owner. There is a limit to this, however, as both authors shun extravagant decorative elements like gilded wooden coffers.

Scholars who have tackled the issue of the ceiling have only had the opportunity to create typologies and consider the stylistic elements of decoration as they relate to the traditional Pompeian Styles. This thesis aims to advance this conversation by describing the importance of ceiling decoration to the overall effect of the decorative schemes within

the Roman house. The study will utilize the coffer as the guiding principle for this exploration due to its lasting popularity throughout the Pompeian Styles. In focusing on the coffer, I will attempt to explain the lasting popularity of this choice of ornamentation. By using a set of case studies spanning two hundred years of decoration in Roman houses, I hope to clearly illustrate the impact of ceiling decoration on the viewer and how it might interact with larger design ensembles. There is little doubt that the changing styles and tastes of the Roman homeowner and artist affected the ways the coffer was represented, but the coffer was also a type of ornamentation. The rhythmic motif of geometric shapes would have had an effect on the viewer and their conception of space in the same way that a mosaic might.

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Introduction

The level of preservation of domestic wall and floor decoration can astonish a new student of the art of the ancient Roman world. Often free from the stark austerity of surviving monumental public art, the embellishment of interior spaces offers a snapshot of the vibrancy of the ancient Mediterranean. The sweeping trompe l'oeil scenes of the Second Style or the elegance of the delicate architectural features of the Third and Fourth Style are a common feature of introductory texts and survey courses. Images of the Pompeian Alexander mosaic from the House of the Faun or the "Cave Canem" mosaic from the House of the Tragic Poet are also well known. Scholarly discussions have also focused, understandably, on wall decoration. August Mau's early work on Pompeii was preoccupied with classifying and studying the wall painting of the well-preserved city and this study defined the four Pompeian styles and their chronology—a system still used by scholars.[1] The abundance of figural and illusionistic motifs coupled with the profusion of examples that survive in Pompeian wall painting probably encouraged this focus. Mosaic work is often ornamental in nature with repeating geometric or vegetal patterns playing significant design roles. The examples that seem most well studied are the figural and mythological scenes that likely imitated the paintings of the Greek masters.

Embellishing one's house was an important part of Roman life for the majority of individuals. The evidence from Pompeii reveals that almost all buildings had some sort of painted surface, often of very high quality.[2] Many scholars have hypothesized the reasons for this culture of decoration among Roman domestic spaces. Both ancient literary sources and the archaeological record reveal that houses were of supreme importance to

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1 Mau, *Pompeii, Its Life and Art*.

2 Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, 159.

Roman elite self-presentation.[3] Though we are lacking considerable material evidence from the houses of the Roman elite residing within the city of Rome itself, ancient writers such as Cicero and Vitruvius offer us clear evidence for the importance of the elite *domus*. Though Cicero discusses domestic space in many of his writings and speeches, his *De domo sua* is particularly revealing. In this work, the orator describes the destruction of his home after his exile as if it were an attack on his own body.[4] Both he and Vitruvius are in agreement that a house is a direct reflection of the personality and status of the owner. There is a limit to this, however, as both authors shun extravagant decorative elements like gilded wooden coffers.

What remains in the archaeological record often strays from the descriptions of ancient writers. One must seriously take into account the fact that houses in the city of Rome would have likely looked somewhat different from those in the Bay of Naples, since the social context of Pompeii or Herculaneum was not the same. The *summi viri* at the capital would have had vast client systems and business ventures stretching beyond both the city and Italy. The local governments of cities in the Bay of Naples would have been less focused on the goals of the empire and more on the quotidian. The simple fact that the population of the city of Rome (ca. one million at the time of Augustus) would have dwarfed that of Pompeii (ca. 10,000) is another factor for possible differences in domestic life and architecture.

The greatest ancient source for the study of Roman domestic decoration comes from Vitruvius who considers his well-planned atrium house as the ideal, but very few surviving examples fit his specifications. Historically, scholars have looked at this as an

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3 Vitruvius, *De Arch* 6.5

4 Cicero, *De Domo Sua* 63

indication for the decline of Roman society following the Augustan period.[5] A great number of houses in Pompeii do preserve atria; however, they simply fit into different plans. Eugene Dwyer has therefore argued that despite the lack of a slavish imitation of Vitruvius' ideal, the houses of Pompeii still reveal the necessity of atria for many households to function.[6] As the primary function of the atrium was as a welcome or waiting area for visiting clients, their presence in the homes of Pompeii reveals the existence of the patron-client system in the city. Though it is likely that a decurion in Pompeii had significantly fewer clients than the senators of the city of Rome, he still required a space to house and entertain them. The house was therefore both a public and private locale and this function necessitated particular architecture and decoration. We can see architectural remains not only in the atria, but in the popularity of picturesque peristyles and large triclinia. The peristyle could function as both a waiting area for clients and an opportunity for the homeowner to reveal his tastes in the form of garden decoration. Often looking out into these peristyles and garden spaces, triclinia were the site of the ever-important *convivium*, or banquet. At these events, the patron could invite his dearest and most loyal clients to discuss matters of both business and pleasure.

Architecture was not the only means by which an ancient Roman homeowner engaged in self-representation. As we will see in this study, embellishment of domestic spaces was of utmost importance. Decoration in the form of paint, stucco, or furnishings would have transformed the often-simple cubic architecture of Roman houses into functioning spaces. How these spaces functioned was often fluid and we know from sources like Vitruvius and Pliny that rooms like the atrium would have hosted multiple

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5 Eugene Dwyer, "The Pompeian Atrium House in Theory and in Practice," 26.

6 Eugene Dwyer, "The Pompeian Atrium House in Theory and in Practice," 32.

functions.[7] Though principally a space for greeting clients, the atrium was also the traditional node of the household. Here one would find important items such as the family lockbox, images of great ancestors, spoils of war, and the family table. We are lucky to know much about these furnishings from Pliny, but the typical trappings of other rooms elude us. The work of Penelope Allison has also provided new ways of looking at the Roman house through the lens of surviving material culture.[8] It is likely, however, that most spaces were ephemeral in their functionality and could act as the backdrop for a myriad of daily activities.

Though the homes lack any of their original movable furnishings, a contemporary viewer of the ruins of Pompeii is still struck by the great variety of decoration embellishing these spaces. As Andrew Wallace-Hadrill states, "the function of decoration is to discriminate and to render the house fit for the pattern of social activity within it."[9] Decorative schemes thus allow scholars today to gain a greater understanding of how ancient Romans envisioned their own living spaces. A hallmark of Roman domestic design until at least the Fourth Style was the imitation of architectural forms. This is clear in the First Style's imitation of stone masonry from monumental public buildings primarily through the three-dimensional wall stucco. The Second Style considerably flattens the three-dimensional elements in favor of trompe l'oeil effects that depict a mixture of scenes from public buildings and theaters.[10] The Third Style reveals a reduction in the use of trompe l'oeil in favor large monochromatic swathes with panels imitating paintings from the elite galleries.[11] The imitation of architecture is least obvious

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7 Vitruvius, *De Arch* 6.5; Pliny *NH* 35.7

8 Allison, *Pompeian Households*.

9 Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, 149.

10 Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D. 250,* 45-49.

11 Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy ,* 63-65

in the Fourth Style, but elements of the other styles are often mixed to create a freer effect.

The evidence supports the importance of decoration that imitated elite architectural forms to the Roman household as a means of both delineating space and portraying a message. Scholars such as John Clarke, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, and Eleanor Leach have recently discussed domestic decoration in terms social function, and not only the formal elements.[12] It is true that the vast illusionistic scenes of the Second Style are impressive and pleasing even to the modern viewer, but there was a reason behind the this choice of decoration that went beyond the aesthetic. Though the illusion would have certainly entertained, the allusions made by these images were of great significance.[13] The clear allusions of the First, Second and Third Styles to monumental public buildings would have evoked the *pietas* of the homeowner and further projected their importance within the public sphere. In concentrating the richness of the Roman public sphere within the household, particularly in the Second Style, the patron also projected a special kind of access to luxury.[14] There is still some restraint apparent in these extravagant styles, however. By only alluding to the luxury of public architecture, the homeowner is maintaining a balance between opulence and ostentation. The walls may be adorned with images of porticoes made of polychromatic marbles and gilded images, but they are still only images. Limiting extravagance to illusionistic wall decoration would help the patron avoid the pitfalls of *luxuria* outlined in Cicero and Vitruvius.

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12 Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*; Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*; Leach, *The Social Life of Painting in Ancient Rome and on the Bay of Naples*.

13 Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, 23.

14 Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy*, 40.

Walls were not the only embellished surfaces in the Roman house, though they have garnered the greatest scholarly interest throughout the decades. Floor mosaics reveal a rich tradition of decorating floors in a manner quite different from walls. Large polychromatic figural mosaics are common in the Second Style; thereafter black-and-white mosaics take precedence. The detailed figural mosaics of the Second Style provide a reflection of what important panel paintings and frescoes may have looked like. Scholars generally consider many of these images as imitations of the great painted works of Greece that are now all but lost.[15] Mosaics are also a common medium for decoration that is neither illusionistic nor figural, but rather ornamental in nature. As is typical of ornament, these mosaics consist of a repeated motif that can affect the viewer in a variety of ways.[16] In the context of Roman houses, these ornamental mosaics could accomplish many goals set out by the patron, the artist, or both. Non-figural mosaics can mark the intended location for furnishings like banqueting couches or they can mark the boundaries of space. These mosaics can also include trompe l'oeil elements that create visual interest for the viewer and may even lead the viewer to look or move in certain directions. As we will see, this tradition of ornamentation is reflected in the decoration of ceilings that can mimic, contrast and even influence the decorative patterns of floor mosaics.

Decoration in Roman houses was clearly not limited to walls,, and there are many surviving examples of elaborately embellished ceilings from domestic contexts. These examples are often fragmentary, however, and many uncovered in the nineteenth century

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15 Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy ,* 63-65

16 Trilling, *Ornament,* 21-46.

have long since faded away.[17] There are several reasons for this poor state of survival; the most readily apparent is the fact that the Romans favored suspended ceilings. When walls collapse so do ceilings. Also, should a roof or second story experience added weight (like that of volcanic ash or *lapilli*), the ceiling is likely to cave under the pressure. Coupled with this innate fragility, Roman domestic ceilings were backed with perishable materials.[18] Wooden beams were generally used to hold up roofs and were set upon walls made of more substantial media. These beams could remain exposed, but the archaeological record indicates that they were often covered. In the most extravagant houses, the patron could afford fine wooden coffered panels to fill the gaps between the beams.[19] The most common type found in the homes of the Bay of Naples, however, is the *incannucciata* method.[20] Described by Vitruvius and closely mimicking the modern "lath and plaster" technique, reeds were bundled together and attached either across the beams of the ceiling or, if shaped, suspended from cords attached to the ceiling beams. Three coats of increasingly fine plaster were then applied to the canes with the final layer consisting possibly of fine ground marble. This final layer would be utilized to apply decoration in the form of paint, molding, freehand stuccowork, or attachments.

Even considering the ease of their destruction, a considerable number of decorated examples survives and allows scholars to draw broad conclusions about the evolution of methods, subjects, and themes found on ceilings. Still, the study of the decoration of ceilings in ancient Roman homes has been rather limited and these

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17 An excellent example of a Fourth Style ceiling from the tablinum of M. Lucretius survives only in drawings preserved in Fausto, *Le case ed i monumenti di Pompei disegnati e descritti*, 1854, Tav. IV.

18 Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking*, 156-159.

19 Cicero *Leg*. 2.2.93; An unpublished example was recently uncovered in the House of Telephus at Herculaneum.

20 Barbet, *La Peinture Romaine*.,; Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking,* 294; Vitruvius 5.10.3

discussions are largely part of broader studies concerning the development of Roman domestic design as a whole. Alix Barbet and Roger Ling have produced two of the most thorough studies on Roman ceilings.[21] Ling's *Roman Painting* provides a broad overview of the development of Roman painted and stucco decoration. He divides four of his chapters along the lines of the four Pompeian Styles and each (except the First Style) holds separate subsections on ceiling decoration. Ling also includes a "Context" section in each chapter that provides a brief explanation of how the decorative elements might work in concert. Barbet's *La peinture murale romaine* does not offer as much in terms of interpretation as Ling, but more than makes up with her photos and diagrams. The volume includes a detailed description of almost every known decorated ceiling from Roman Italy.

Even taking these detailed studies into account, discussions of the decoration of ceilings in ancient Roman homes has been rather limited. These discussions are largely part of broader studies concerning the development of Roman domestic design as a whole. With so few examples of ceiling ornamentation surviving in comparison to that of walls and floors, it is unsurprising that there are no significant studies on how their design schemes might function independently. Scholars often refer to ceilings only in passing and in the context of how they fit into their respective Pompeian Styles. Little work exists on why certain designs were chosen for the ceiling. The prevalence of the coffer is often attributed to the architectural illusionism important to the decoration of the Roman home. This attribution ignores the question of why the coffer persists beyond the architectural Second Style and into the Third and even the Fourth. It is unlikely that the coffer was chosen only because it evoked basilicas or elegant porticoes. This thesis will attempt to

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21 Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*; Ling, *Roman Painting*.

address ceiling ornamentation with a more nuanced view that takes into account the power that repeating motifs have exercised over the viewer and unique cases of ceiling decoration in the context of Roman design. With this in mind, I will utilize the ever-present coffer as to develop a clearer understanding of how and why ancient Romans decorated the ceilings of their houses.

Roman domestic ceiling decoration can consists of a variety of forms, but most involve the coffer in some iteration. It is helpful now to offer a brief history of the coffer's use in not the domestic sphere, but the public. It begins in the monumental architecture of Greece where stone workers carved coffers from precious marbles to fill the voids left between ceiling crossbeams. These coffers, as in the Erechtheion in Athens, were even further embellished in paint.[22] We later find imitation coffers in Hellenistic tombs like a Thracian tomb at Othustra and the Alexandrian hypogeum of Anfushi.[23] Possibly drawing inspiration from these impressive Greek sanctuaries, the coffer becomes a part of Roman civic and sacred architecture. Roger Ulrich provides a bibliography of ancient Roman writers and their references to the impressive nature of the coffered ceiling.[24] Ennius, Lucan, Virgil, Cicero, and Livy all describe the coffer as typical of the gilded halls of eastern rulers with infinite wealth.[25] Within the Roman sphere, Vitruvius tells us that the Curia was ornamented with coffering and Cicero mentions the coffers in the temple of Castor, and the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus was also famously coffered.[26]

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22 Giasemi Frantzi, "The Gradual Revealing of Colour on the Ceiling of the Porch of the Maidens in the Erechtheion."

23 Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*.

24 Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking*., 166.

25 Cic. Tusc. I.85; Bell. Civ. 10.112-13; Aen. I.726

26 Vitruvius 5.2.1, Cicero *Verr*. 1.133

Within the domain of domestic decorative schemes, the coffer played an important role from at least the fourth century BCE.[27] Early domestic examples are rare in the archaeological record, but there is evidence of painted stucco coffers in Hellenistic houses in Priene and Salapia. Even earlier examples of coffer-inspired ceiling ornamentation exist in rock-cut Etruscan tombs, as in the seventh century BCE Tomba Cima at San Giuliano, but the decoration of tombs was likely motivated by different factors than that of the house and therefore will not be covered in detail here. [28] By the time of the Pompeian Second Style, the coffer was evidently a common form of ceiling embellishment.[29] Examples of Second Style ceilings with coffered motifs exist at places like the *fauces* of the Samnite House in Pompeii and the niches of cubiculum 11 at Villa A at Oplontis. These coffers are created in a trompe l'oeil style similar to the illusionistic décor of the walls. Coffering motifs begin to wane in the surviving Third Style examples where they flatten, yet they still maintain their distinctive shape. By the Fourth Style, there are no surviving examples of ceilings that clearly imitate coffers, but there are what I would term "spiritual successors" in several examples with deeply recessed geometric lacunars often with the stucco molding highlighting their borders. The Fourth Style also sees a few examples of the tapestry style, *Tapetenmuster,* on walls.[30] This decoration type is characterized by repeating squares that are often described as imitating the tapestries of Greek East, but it is also possible that this style was influenced in part by the repeating geometric motifs of the coffer.

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27 Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*; Ling, *Roman Painting*.
28 Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking*, 160–161.
29 Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*; Ling, *Roman Painting*.
30 Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 70–71.

Scholars who have tackled the issue of the ceiling have only had the opportunity to create typologies and consider the stylistic elements of decoration as they relate to the traditional Pompeian Styles. This thesis aims to advance this conversation by describing the importance of ceiling decoration to the overall effect of the decorative schemes within the Roman house. The study will utilize the coffer as the guiding principle for this exploration due to its lasting popularity throughout the Pompeian Styles. In focusing on the coffer, I will attempt to explain the lasting popularity of this choice of ornamentation. By using a set of case studies spanning two hundred years of decoration in Roman houses, I hope to clearly illustrate the impact of ceiling decoration on the viewer and how it might interact with larger design ensembles. There is little doubt that the changing styles and tastes of the Roman homeowner and artist affected the ways the coffer was represented, but the coffer was also a type of ornamentation. The rhythmic motif of geometric shapes would have had an effect on the viewer and their conception of space in the same way that a mosaic might.

To accomplish this goal, this study will utilize not only the work of art historians, but also that of anthropologists as a guide to answering the question of why the coffer was such an effective and popular design element. John Clarke's work on black and white figural mosaics was an integral work in the conception of Roman design elements as more than aesthetic and political, but functional.[31] Coining the term "kinesthetic address," Clarke argued that the gestures and positions of many figural mosaics could encourage movement in the viewer and affect their experience of a space. In a similar vein, the social anthropologist Alfred Gell studied the power that ornamentation and repetitive motifs exert upon a viewer. As he states,

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31 Clarke and College Art Association of America, *Roman Black-and-White Figural Mosaics*.

"patterns…generate relationships *over time* between persons and things, because what they present to mind is, cognitively speaking, always 'unfinished business'"[32] In short, repeating motifs lead viewers to consider them closely, but also move the eye along their path. I will apply this theory to the surviving examples of coffered-inspired ceilings in an attempt to discern not simply how coffered designs fit into stylistic ensembles, but also how they functioned as elements of ornamentation to highlight other areas of their respective spaces.

This thesis will consist of two main chapters concerning the coffered ceiling as an ornamental element in the Roman house. Chapter 1 will describe language of ornamentation as it applies primarily to Roman mosaics as well as further detailing the theories of Alfred Gell and Alois Riegl on the function and power of ornamentation. Chapter 2 will present four major case studies consisting of archaeological sites with coffered-inspired ceilings throughout the four Pompeian Styles. Here, I will apply the theories outlined in chapter 2 to these spaces with the goal of highlighting the effect of the coffered motif on viewer experience. For the sake of brevity, the scope of this thesis is limited to works produced no later than the dawn of the second century.

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32 Gell, *Art and Agency*, 80.

Chapter 1: Ornament in Roman Houses

Decoration in the ancient Mediterranean relied on a complex range of sources to achieve a variety of goals, but the utilization of the visual illusion constitutes a common thread. The imitation of well-known architectural motifs is apparent in both monumental and domestic instances. Examples of interior decoration survives particularly well across time periods and geography from the art of the Etruscans to the Hellenistic tombs of the northern Greece. This study aims to uncover why the coffered ceiling was such an attractive motif across generations in the homes of Roman Campania; an understanding of decorative illusionism is a necessary prerequisite to finding an answer. In this chapter, I will describe the role of illusionistic decorative schemes in the Roman house. Following this I will discuss the importance of imitation in the development of ornamentation and how ornamental schemes functioned in the home. As the collection of decorative motifs in the Roman ornamental toolset evolved, the coffer, and coffer-like geometric forms, became a hallmark. Though there are few surviving examples of First Style ceilings in the Roman world, evidence exists of faux-coffered ceilings in Hellenistic Masonry Style homes.[33]

Before progressing in this study, it is important to define the terms that will figure heavily in this paper: "imitation" and "illusionistic." Both words will be used interchangeably to define visual representations aiming to evoke structures or objects. These representations are not restricted to two-dimensional depictions, though these are the focus of the study. Three-dimensional imitations in either stone or plaster will also be considered. Imitative or illusionistic representations generally build off of a "prototype," to use the term of Alfred Gell.[34] We can infer that these prototypes actually existed in the

[33] Ling, *Roman Painting*, 1.
[34] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 99and A

real world and were used as the basis for illusionistic designs by artists. These prototypes can include all manner of elements including flora, fauna, furniture, and architectural structures or design elements.

I have chosen the coffer because it represents a heavily-used illusionistic motif common in extant examples of ceiling decoration. True coffers were a functional decorative element that worked to fill the spaces left by wooden crossbeams.[35] Wood and stone were the likely candidates for true architectural coffers, as the few surviving examples indicate. In this study, the "illusionistic coffer" is one that does not serve the purpose of filling space between a roof's crossbeams. Illusionistic coffers appear in paint, stuccowork, and in stone or cement. Though painted and stucco versions appear in a variety of different locations in the home, the function of which will be described later, stone or cement coffers appear primarily in arches.

Prior to tackling the specific issue of the function of coffers in decorative motifs, it is important to discuss the prevalence of illusionism in the Roman household. The primary role of decoration in the houses of ancient Rome was to address the needs of the rooms as lived environments.[36] It is clear from both literary sources and archaeological remains that decoration of the house was a wholly conscious endeavor. Vitruvius clearly outlines the ideal function of the popular atrium house as a backdrop for elite political self-representation.[37] It is important here to mention that discussions of domestic decoration and its intersection with social history are largely limited to Romans wealthy enough to afford elaborate decorative schemes. Many scholars have tackled this issue in terms of the lower classes in recent decades, but our richest source of evidence is still the

[35] Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking,*164.
[36] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans,* 1.
[37] Vitriuvius, *De Arch*. 6.5

elite sphere.[38] In the elite sphere the home was a political center and a room's embellishment acted as a backdrop for this function. Across styles, artistic references to monumental public architecture were the norm, but there was clearly no intention to fool a viewer into thinking they were entering such a space. Rather, as Andrew Wallace-Hadrill states, "what matters are not the visual games played, but the associations evoked, by the decoration: its power not of illusion, but of allusion."[39] These allusions are integral to our understanding of how the Romans conceived of their domestic spaces.

Illusionism on the Walls of Pompeii and Herculaneum

The Masonry or First Style of decoration is founded on the principle of illusionism in its purest form. Here, the aim of decoration, both interior and exterior, was to evoke the grandeur of monumental Hellenistic architecture, truly available to only the wealthiest individuals in society. In the Samnite House in Herculaneum, we can see how the design of the walls is meant to evoke the extravagantly colored marbles of Hellenistic buildings (fig. 1). This painting is not simply two dimensional, but the plaster is used to create a relief imitating ashlar masonry. The First Style does not represent some slavish imitation of real-world architectural forms, however, and artists seemed free to use these forms to create an attractive interior. This differs from the Masonry Style decoration found in houses at Delos, which is more faithful to the architectural prototypes (fig. 2).[40] In a true ashlar wall the plinth and the colorful orthostates of marble would make up the lower foundational layer of the wall, but in the Roman First Style the artist brings them to the center of the wall where they may receive the most attention from a visitor to the house.[41] Though this change may appear unassuming, it is an indication of a process that

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[38] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans.*
[39] Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, 23.
[40] Ling, *Roman Painting*, 13n Pa
[41] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 40.

defines Roman domestic design schemes: innovation. The walls, floors, and ceilings of domestic interiors were all opportunities for the politically-minded Roman to construct their public identities and innovation was common. In the case of this First Style innovation, moving the visually appealing colored course higher would have allowed for easier viewing above furnishings.

The Second Style allows us many more examples to consider when studying Roman illusionistic designs. At its core, the Second Style was made up of partial trompe l'oeil scenes that created the effect of recession into space. Whereas the First Style provided a setting evoking the luxurious materials of public architecture, the Second Style created a more literal backdrop. Here, the homeowner and his guests were players in a fantasy of Hellenistic opulence. Villa A at Oplontis provides abundant evidence of the Second Style and its illusionistic characteristics in cubiculum 11, a small triclinium, an atrium, and an oecus. Oecus 15 typifies the grand backgrounds of this period with a high wall emphasized by four immense columns (fig. 3). Looking through the columns, the viewer is treated to an eternally receding view into a colonnade. At the center of this tableau is an arched opening framing a golden tripod perched atop a thick columnar base. Arranged in the foreground are objects such as theatrical masks, a torch, and a peacock. Many scholars have argued for the inspiration of the Second Style, claiming both temple and theatrical architecture as the primary influence.[42] It is likely, however, that these designs developed from some mixture of both of these as well as Hellenistic palace

[42] Josef Engemann, gArchitecturdarstellungen des frühen zweiten Stils. R Rls. R Mitteilungen"itHendrik Gerard Beyen, *Die Pompejansiche Wanddekoration von Zweiten bis zum Vierten Stil*; Eleanor Winsor Leach, en von Zweiten ten :"eAWEwxcG","properties":{"formattedCCampanian Painting and the Transition from the Second to the Third Style"; K. Schefold, *Pompejanische Malerei: Sinn und Ideengeschichte*; Ling, *Roman Painting*, 30.

architecture.[43] The Second Style is not limited to the walls of oeci and atria, but also embellishes intimate spaces such as cubicula.[44] Cubiculum 11 at Oplontis is an excellent example of how this type of decoration moved its way into spaces not usually visited by typical guests (fig. 4). The opulent landscapes of the Second Style emphasize how special these spaces would have felt.

Moving into the Third Style (ca. 15 BCE-45 CE), illusionism appears to fall out of favor with Roman tastes.[45] Sweeping scenes marked by receding space and evocations of grand architecture are abandoned in favor of thin flat large monochromatic panels with elegant borders. These borders often take the form of impossibly thin architectural forms like columns and aediculae as in the tablinum of the House of M. Lucretius Fronto (fig. 5). These spindly supports also appear in sculptural evidence echoing their representations in three-dimensional space as well.[46] Some scholars, however, have argued that the Third Style maintains some measure of Hellenistic imitation.[47] In particular, Third Style painting may reveal an attempt at emulating aristocratic *pinacothecae*, or picture galleries. Originating in the East, ancient sources reveal their popularity as spaces for dining in the Roman world.[48] These rooms would have likely included panel paintings for the diners to consider and discuss as they ate. The popularity of such rooms likely led to the inclusion of panel-like scenes in the schemes of the Third Style.

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[43] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 45–49; Ling *Roman Painting*, 30.
[44] Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, 28es a
[45] Ling *Roman Painting*, 52-53
[46] Stefano de Caro, M CSL_CITATION {"citationlla of Poppaea at Oplontis: A Preliminary Report, Repor
[47] Petersen, *The Freedman in Roman Art and Art History*, 137reedman in Roman Art and Art HistorynID":"fi0LQuPY","pRecreative Fictions.
[48] Varro, *De Re Rustica* 1.2.10; 1.59.2.

If the Third Style moves away from illusionism and toward ornamentation, the Fourth Style (45-79 CE) embraces the decorative even more wholeheartedly. The Fourth Style is marked by its eclecticism. Though there are several specific hallmarks of this period, perhaps its most important characteristic is its deft fusion of the preceding styles to create something new.[49] Often looking quite like the Third Style with its large monochromatic panels, the Fourth Style stands apart through its sheer innovative power. One is hard pressed to find direct references to real architectural forms in this style, though some have tried.[50] Lauren Petersen points to the possible evocation of a picture gallery in the frieze in the upper zone on the four walls of room *h* in the House of Octavius Quartio in Pompeii (fig. 6).[51] This may refer specifically to the Hellenistic "painted porches" or stoa decorated with narrative fresco.[52] The painted frieze of the House of Octavius Quartio is broken into two narrative sections: one depicting the labors of Hercules and the other showing scenes from the *Iliad*. This example aside, the walls of Fourth Style houses do not forego the typical illusions of panel paintings by any means as is clear in the so-called Ixion Room of the House of the Vettii in Pompeii (fig. 7).[53] Here, the carefully curated figural panels provided ekphrastic interest for guests just as in the Third Style, but singular figures against a white background are now added alongside them. Even with these nods toward the illusionistic, the Fourth Style clearly marks a choice to remove the bounds of architectural illusionism in favor of embellishment that allowed more freedom in marking space for visual pleasure and intended use.

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[49] Ling *Roman Painting*, 71-72
[50] See n. 12
[51] Petersen, *The Freedman in Roman Art and Art History*, 142; Van Buren, Pinacothecae: With Especial Reference to Pompeii, to P
[52] Merrit, rrit,Stoa Poikile.o The fifth century BCE Stoa Poikile in the Athenian Agora is a well-known example.
[53] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 100.

Until now, I have focused on the prevalence of, primarily architectural, illusionism in Roman painting. Though not the focus of this study, it is necessary to mention another area of the house where such design schemes were important: the garden. The walls adjacent to gardens are often embellished with images that evoke or reflect the typical trappings of Roman gardens. These depictions seem to begin in the late Second Style as in the paintings from the Villa of Livia at Primaporta (fig. 8.).[54] By the Fourth Style scholars such as Roger Ling have argued for garden painting as a means of creating the illusion of space.[55] Examples of this are found in the small garden spaces at Oplontis Villa A where depictions of various flora and fauna were painted along sided bubbling fountains to enhance these cramped spaces (fig. 9). These paintings depict architectural elements that one might find in a real garden like low walls and fences. Alongside fountains, paintings regularly evoked the typical trappings of the real world garden.[56] *Pinakes* (representations of marble reliefs supported by herms) were a common choice as in the painting of the House of the Golden Bracelet (fig. 10). The same painting also depicts herms similar to those found *in situ* in the garden of the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto (fig. 11). Though certainly functioning differently from the interior paintings we have discussed, these examples from gardens further reveal both the importance and the innovation of illusionistic designs in ancient Rome.

Illusionism on Floors and Ceilings

Scholarship has paid a great deal attention to the painted designs of wall decoration in ancient Roman houses, but comparatively few scholars tackle floors and ceilings. The importance of these zones should not be ignored as they likely played an

[54] Ling, *Roman Painting*, 150.
[55] Ling, *Roman Painting*, 152
[56] , *The Gardens of Pompeii*, 55Gard

important part in a Roman's experience of her space. Both surfaces were richly decorated in elite homes and their designs evolve along paths similar to those on walls. Still, these areas are not direct reflections of the styles found on vertical surfaces, but rather they often work to complement the designs of walls.[57]

Though it may seem so from the title of this section, floor mosaics and ceiling painting do not follow the same developmental paths. The very issue of differing media should be the first indication of this. Floors are often decorated with mosaic schemes consisting of many tiny tesserae made of stone and glass, though the ancient Roman certainly had other choices. Plain cement floors were an excellent choice for utilitarian spaces like kitchens and colored cement with scattered insets of valuable stone provided a different type of visual interest.[58] Compared to walls and floors there are few extant ceilings, but those that do survive are decorated primarily with painted fresco. Decorative stuccos also appear as both the primary form of embellishment and accents to painted spaces. Literary sources also tell us that wooden coffering and paneling were used in the most elite homes and recent excavations of the House of Telephus at Herculaneum revealed evidence of one of these elaborate ceilings (fig. 12). The differing experience of ceilings and floors also likely influenced design choices. Floor mosaics were obviously walked upon and were often obscured by the placement of movable furniture. Mosaic artists could respond to the necessities of daily life by marking the placement for things like dining couches in the very design of the mosaic.[59] As ceilings were not walked upon,

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[57] Clarke, OTERO_ITEM CSL_CITATION {"citationID":"rfoumDgp","properties":{"formattedCitation":"{\\rtf Clarke, \\uc0\\u8220{}Notes o*The Decoration of Walls, Ceilings, and Floors in Italy in the Second and Third Centuries A.D.*

[58] De Vos, s, s, OTERO_ITEM CSL_CITATION {

[59] Pappalardo, Ciardiello, and Pedicini, *Greek and Roman Mosaics*, 53.

there was more freedom in their designs and repetitive motifs that filled the entirety of surface were common.

Illusionism in floor mosaics is generally less common than the other surfaces of the domestic spaces. In the First Style, mosaics often consist of geometric patterns (fig. 13). The central position of many of these designs may actually evoke carpeting.[60] Though there are not surviving Roman textiles of this type, it is likely that mosaic floors were used as replacements for things like rugs, as they were more durable.[61] The earliest mosaic floor from the Mediterranean found in Gordion in Turkey may confirm this idea (fig. 14).[62] The haphazard placement of sections of mosaic motifs seem to allude to a floor covered in various rugs. A rather interesting use of illusionism in mosaic floors is found in the motif of the "unswept floor" (fig. 15).[63] In the second-century example, now held in the Vatican Museums at Rome, a white ground mosaic is covered with illusionistic refuse typical of a Roman banquet. Things like chicken feet and the empty shells of sea urchins are scattered about with shadows placed around them to create a sense of depth. "Unswept floor" mosaics reveal the extent to which mosaicists were able to represent illusionism within the medium.

Beginning in the Second Style mosaics begin to include designs that fit well with impressive illusionistic architectural scenes found on walls. Within this context of heightened architectural imitation, mosaic floors show an attempt to evoke ceiling designs.[64] In an example from Tusculum from the mid-first century BCE, a polychrome mosaic depicts a lozenge-shaped lacunar within a rectangular frame. At the center of the

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[60] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 40in t
[61] Pappalardo, Ciardiello, and Pedicini, *Greek and Roman Mosaics*, 11-13.
[62] Ling, *Ancient Mosaics*, 19ent
[63] Pappalardo, Ciardiello, and Pedicini, *Greek and Roman Mosaics*, 36-45.
[64] Ling, *Roman Painting*, 48n Pa

lozenge is a winged female figure with fabric billowing around her head and shoulders. Both the lozenge and the outer rectangle are lined with an egg and dart pattern in white. We see this type of border recreated in stucco around lacunars in Fourth Style ceilings. This mosaic section was part of a larger mosaic likely depicting a complete coffered ceiling as is implied by other fragments (fig. 16). Polychromatic mosaics such as these would fall out of fashion after the Second Style, but the tendency to imitate ceiling coffering persisted. The Third-Style atrium of the house of Paquius Proculus contains an impressive monochromatic mosaic floor framing the impluvium (fig. 17).[65] The floor primarily depicts a grid consisting of squares that seem to reference coffers. Within these squares are images of animals as well as nondescript encircled human busts evocative of *imagines clipeatae*. Along the main axis leading from the *fauces* are two large lozenges at each end of the room containing peacocks. They hearken back to those from Tusculum, but their monochromatic austerity is attuned to the tastes of the Third Style. Mosaics such as these are not uncommon, but it is clear that their illusionistic characteristics are short lived. The popularity of monochrome floors flattens out the trompe l'oeil effects of the Second Style just as in the walls of the Third Style and beyond, where solid panels of color superseded fanciful views.

The development of styles of ceiling decoration has received excellent treatments from both Roger Ling and Alix Barbet.[66] The comparative lack of evidence for ceilings creates a manageable data set, but it is clear that we only have a thin slice of the varieties present in this medium. Still, it is clear from the surviving examples that embellishment of ceilings was as important as any other surface. The general trend of ceilings across

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[65] Pappalardo, Ciardiello, and Pedicini, *Greek and Roman Mosaics*, 185-186.

[66] Ling, *Roman Painting*; Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*; Barbet and Guimier-Sorbet, orbet, mier-Sorbet, ONDans La MosaMosa Du IVe Si Sie Sisae.-C. . ie Sisaet, miR. . ie Si RomaineSisSes Rapports Avec LRapports Avec, Le Stuc et La Peinture.e

styles was to create designs that referenced the basic form of the coffer.[67] I use the term "reference" and not "imitation" because the coffer gradually loses any verisimilitude as the styles evolved. By the Fourth Style the coffer's legacy persists only in geometric patterns and deeply inset plaster indentations that imitate lacunars in form, but not in number. Even with its gradual abstraction, it is clear that the coffer is an appropriate design element for lofty spaces in the Roman mindset.

With its roots in monumental architecture, the coffer would have been an obvious choice for the embellishment of early ceilings in the Masonry Style. No Pompeian examples survive from the First Style, but there are a handful of examples from the Hellenistic world. Scholars have proposed different sources as the prototypes for the Roman utilization of illusionistic coffers including Hellenistic houses and the tombs of Alexandria and Etruria.[68] The poor state of preservation of these schemes outside of tombs make it difficult to grasp exactly how widespread this idea was within domestic decoration. The identification of one source is impossible and it is more perhaps more useful to attribute it to a wider Mediterranean taste for imitation. Our discussion will therefore focus on examples from the Second Style and beyond, as they are not only well preserved, but also distinctly Roman in their inspiration.

The House of the Griffins on the Palatine provides us with two Second-Style examples of coffering done in stucco. In the room of the griffins, there are coffer shapes in shallow stucco relief on the vault (fig. 18). Plain white, these incised designs alternate between the rectangles and the illusion of coffers consisting of a lozenge transcribed by a rectangle. Ling points to the presence of holes in the coffers that may have been used for some sort of attachment, though Barbet believes the random placement of many of the

[67] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 77aine
[68] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 18–23; Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking*, 166.

holes indicates otherwise.[69] Room 1 of the same house preserves what is perhaps a more traditional coffering pattern in its vault (fig. 19). Here a section of the vault reveals a set of regular squares that likely spanned its length. There are red lines running the length of the coffers, though there is no further surviving embellishment. The centers of the coffers do not survive in their entirety, though what does is plain white.

Illusionistic painted coffers survive in vaulted niches in cubiculum 11 at the Villa of the Mysteries and cubiculum 16 at Villa A of Oplontis. At Oplontis, both vaults depict painted schemes representing square and rectangular coffers painted in a variety of colors including added gold (fig. 20).[70] At the Villa of the Mysteries, the east alcove preserves evidence of what Clarke terms a "latticework ceiling" with holes for some sort of attachments (fig. 21).[71] Though not a clear representation of coffers in a grid pattern, this ceiling likely still imitates coffered schemes. The artist made a clear effort to shade the painted squares to produce a sense of depth. A painted coffering scheme also appears at the fauces of the Samnite House in Herculaneum (fig. 22). A simple grid pattern of square coffers outlined in green and porphyry survives alongside the First Style wall encrustation. Within these examples of the Second Style we can see coffers used to both represent ceiling decoration with fidelity and also to use this motif creatively.

Within the Third Style, coffered ceiling decoration relinquishes the limits of fidelity to the typical grid pattern in favor of eclectic designs containing various geometric shapes. It is also in the Third Style that ceiling decoration begins a clear move away from architectural influence and into fanciful designs emphasizing a central point. A clear example of the changes taking place in the Third Style exists in the painted

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[69] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 78aine Please use French, German, etc. capitalization.
[70] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 121n the Lives of*La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 79aineClarke 121-122, Barbet 79-80
[71] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 109.

ceiling of room 8 in the House of the Cabinetmaker in Pompeii (fig. 32). The ceiling of this *triclinium* contains both a flat surface and a possible vault, both embellished with a complex web of coffer shapes on a black ground.[72] The flat area preserves a more traditional grid pattern, but the areas between the squares are filled with stars made up of lozenge-shaped coffers. There is also evidence of larger squares that would have held mythological creatures or figures. The vault's decoration reveals a more balanced use of square and lozenge coffers, each with a central rosette. At the center of the entire scheme was a winged figure within a square.

Ceiling design schemes of the Fourth Style offer the most varied types of any other—a survival that should be credited to their state of preservation. It is during this time period that we are able to compare domestic examples with those found in the extravagant imperial ceilings of the Domus Transitoria and Domus Aurea. Even as this period produces schemes that seem to completely ignore architectural conventions, the coffer is still a popular form and its legacy is apparent in both private homes and residences of the emperor. The ceiling of the vault in room R at the House of the Golden Cupids in Pompeii an example of how the grid pattern of the coffer is still in use (fig. 23). Here painted stucco coffers contain various shapes and detailed embellishment.[73] The Fourth Style also provides examples of an increased tendency to play with levels in ceilings. The late Third Style revealed a fashion for shallow segmental vaults in ceilings and the Fourth Style adds inset geometric shapes to this.[74] The references to the coffer in these schemes are evident in room f of the House of Octavius Quartio (fig. 24).[75] Here a

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[72] Ling and Arthur, *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii*, 286; Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 140ineomLing 1997 286, Barbet 140-143.
[73] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 220-222.
[74] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 140, 215.
[75] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 256-258.

fragmentary piece of the design reveals a deep lozenge set within a rectangle not unlike examples from the House of the Griffins and even the mosaic from Tusculum.

Illusionism and its Purpose

Why was the Roman design aesthetic so focused on illusionism? This is perhaps too great a question to tackle here, but we can gain an understanding of at least one facet of this complex issue. There is the ostensible projection of political authority that comes from transforming parts of a home into a palatial space. Alluding to the power of the wealthiest would set a stage for the performance of power that defined the Roman social structure. There is still a nagging question that this theory does not answer: why was there a need to imitate things that one could afford?

One is not surprised to find imitations of aristocratic architecture in the smaller houses of Pompeii where an individual probably could not afford all of the trappings of finely carved wooden ceilings or marble columns for their peristyle. They may not have had access to gilded *imagines clipeatae* or the funds to set up bubbling fountains. A problem arises, however, when one considers that there are several extant Roman homes that likely had very wealthy residents. Villa A at Oplontis is an extravagant example of this confusing dichotomy. A vast suburban villa with evidence of the finest decorations money could buy still utilized illusionistic techniques in its design. The Villa under the Farnesina in Rome is another surprising example of imitation when it may not have been economically necessary. The decoration of Room NN is in the late Second Style and clearly evokes an extravagant *pinacotheca* with large panel paintings and smaller *pinakes*. Though the identity of the owner of this villa along the bank of the Tiber is controversial, it is possible that Agrippa himself owned it.[76] As Bettina Bergman points

[76] Bettina Bergmann, CSL_CITATION {"citationID":"uRecreative Fictions, Ficti

out, the decoration of this room is of the highest quality and represents tastes that look forward to the elegant Third Style.[77] She goes on to question the necessity for imitative design schemes in what was certainly one of the wealthiest houses in the city of Rome. It is likely that the homeowners could afford actual painted panels to hang upon their walls like those described in ancient literary sources.[78] It is possible that the use of this fictive organization was a conscious choice in light of Agrippan reforms. In 18 BCE, Agrippa gave a speech compelling Romans to move art from the private sphere and into the public.[79] This sentiment echoes the ideas set forth by Cicero that proliferation of private art collections was leading to *luxuria* among the elite.[80] This choice not to embellish the walls with real painted panels, Bergmann argues, might represent the homeowner's aim to fulfill Agrippa's new guidelines.

Bergmann also proposes a broader message for this design choice that is applicable to Roman painting as whole. Room B of the Villa Farnesina is not decorated with only representations of painted panels on a monochromatic background; it is filled with eclectic imagery.[81] Along with the Hellenizing central scenes and painted *pinakes*, there are representations of sculptural supports of the Egyptianizing Zeus-Ammon. Archaizing figures were also painted in Room B alongside the Hellenistic depiction of Venus. This collection of disparate imagery is perhaps a nod to the growing imperial power of Rome and all of the territory it controlled. It is also a representation of the freedom of Roman design and its belief "that the optimal mode of artistic creation is not a direct copy of nature but a new combination of well-chosen excerpts."[82]

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[77] Bettina Bergmann, CSL_CITATION {"citationID":"tRecreative Fictions, 107.
[78] Varro, *De Re Rustica* 1.2.10; 1.59.2.
[79] Bettina Bergmann, CSL_CITATION {"citationID":"pRecreative Fictions, Fictions,
[80] Cic. *Tusc*. I.85
[81] Bettina Bergmann, "Greek Masterpieces and Roman Recreative Fictions," 106
[82] Bettina Bergmann, "Greek Masterpieces and Roman Recreative Fictions," 107

The goal of these ensembles is thus not verism, but the accumulation of the finest elements one can find. Bergmann highlights the Roman distinction between *dis-simulatio* and *simulatio*.[83] While the former is the simple creation of a copy, the latter is the transformation of a copy into something individual. We thus find ourselves back at the importance of innovation in the Roman design sphere. Bergmann aligns this ability to innovate with the Third Style and beyond, but this is a hallmark of Roman embellishment throughout time. In no case was the intention of an artist to create a facsimile of a particular building, but to tailor design to space.

Illusionism meets Ornament: The Case of the Coffer

Where does the coffer fit into this discussion of the Roman taste for eclectic and illusionistic design ensembles? We will address specific spaces in the next chapter, but from the basic overview of this chapter it is clear that the form of the coffer could not be easily abandoned even as tastes changed over two centuries. The answer to this question is complex and requires an understanding of what the coffer may have meant both culturally and in the realm of interior design ensembles. Used often in temples and public buildings, this form would have played a significant role in the daily life of most Romans even if he or she did not choose the coffer to embellish the home. When we take a close look at the locations where the coffer appears in a particularly Roman context, its manifold significance becomes apparent. To the devout Roman viewer the coffer likely represented the lofty arc of the heavens and the realm of the gods; to the individual aspiring to wealth and political success it was a mark of opulence; and to the artist the coffer was a means of drawing the eye along a particular path to the various focal points of a space.

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[83] Bettina Bergmann, "Greek Masterpieces and Roman Recreative Fictions," 106

The long history of the coffer likely began in sacred architecture and evidence from Greece reveals the popularity of marble coffers used in temples large and small, as in the porch of the Erechtheion in Athens (fig. 25.).[84] Though the color has faded from the majority of surviving coffers, we know from paintings and close analysis that these would have been brightly colored.[85] As you stood on the porch of a temple or, if you were so lucky, inside the cella, a glance up would have revealed a breathtakingly vivid sight. It is likely that many of these ceilings would have been gilded as well. Livy describes how King Antiochus intended to build a temple to Jupiter Capitolinus "of which not only the coffered ceiling, but all the walls, were to be covered with revetments of gold."[86] The expectation is that—of course—the ceiling of the temple would be gold and coffered, but walls were a completely different issue. Ancient authors also reveal the association of the coffer with the heavens themselves.[87] On the palace of Domitian Statius states, "the view travels upward, the tired vision scarcely reaches the summit, and you would think it was the coffering (*laquearia*) of the golden sky."[88] Manilius refers to them similarly when discussin the organization of the stars, "The fires [of the constellations] coffer heaven with various designs."[89] In attempting to explain the tendency toward illusionistic coffered ceilings in Second Style design ensembles, Alix Barbet proposes that it was a nod to the sacred architecture that was also evoked on the walls.[90] She goes on to state

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[84] Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking*, 166.
[85] Giasemi Frantzi, "The Gradual Revealing of Colour on the Ceiling of the Porch of the Maidens in the Erechtheion."
[86] Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking*, 166, Livy 41.20.9
[87] Matthews, ERO_ITEM CSL_CITATION {"citationID":"nh75FBgq","properties":{"formattedCitation*Roman Woodworking.*, 1566 Woo
[88] Statius *Silv*. 4.2. 18-31
[89] Manilius *Astronomica* 1.533
[90] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 89aine

that such a roofing system would have seemed fitting for the godly images painted on walls as well.

Beyond literary sources, we can perhaps look to an architectural form that does not find its roots in Greece, but made ample use of the coffer: the triumphal arch. The first century Arch of Titus is our earliest surviving example of this type and may reveal more about the close association of the coffer with the divine in the Roman mindset. Constructed around 81 CE under the emperor Domitian, the arch commemorates the victory in Judaea of his late brother Titus.[91] The interior vault of the arch is particularly significant as it contains the bulk of sculptural decoration. Toward the centers of the interior surfaces of the pylons are depictions of Titus' triumph complete with chariot and spoils. Immediately above these panels begins the coffering that fills the vault. At the center of the vault is a large panel with a sculptural depiction of Titus. The late emperor is riding upon the back of an eagle as he completes the process of apotheosis. This construction with a set of coffers with a central panel is common in the Third Style decoration of houses, often with a small image of a god at the center. Here the association of the coffers with the heavens is nearly explicit. Four small erotes are shown at each corner of the central panel almost as if they are presenting or revealing the scene of apotheosis. As the viewer, it is like we are receiving a privileged view through sky and into divinity and that very sky is here made up of coffers. The Arch of Trajan at Benevento creates a similar effect as the central panel depicts emperor Trajan as the goddess Victory crowns him. We are once again treated to a scene of divinity among the coffers.

[91] Ramage and Ramage, *Roman Art*, 176 Artg

The coffer was also a mark of wealth, particularly the wealth of Hellenistic kings. Cicero is outraged during his time that wealthy Roman aristocrats have taken upon themselves to decorate their private porticoes with wooden coffers, just as Eastern rulers did.[92] A true-coffered ceiling would have been a truly precious undertaking for the home, as it required a large deal of wood to be finely carved. As Roger Ulrich points out, ancient authors often considered coffering a hallmark of foreign wealth. Ennius describes a ceiling of gold and ivory in Troy, Lucan mentions the gold beams of Cleopatra's golden ceiling, and Virgil does the same with Dido's palace.[93] The use then of illusionistic coffers could thus aid in the owner's creation of a backdrop of architectural wealth important to the Second and Third Styles. It could also act as index of the owner's awareness of foreign courtly life if he was astute enough to have coffers in his home or in a painted portico just like Dido or Ptolemy.

It is also useful to consider the coffer independent of its cultural baggage and make an attempt to appreciate it as a form of useful ornament. Illusionistic coffered ceilings are rarely the focal point of a room in the Roman house. It is clear in almost every case that the embellishment of walls was the primary goal of the room's design. Floor mosaics could also gain high status, particularly when *emblemata* were inserted. Outside of the imperial palaces, no surviving ceilings contain complex mythological scenes. At most, we see images of nondescript goddesses or Erotes among the coffers. It is thus likely that ceiling decoration was meant to be generally unobtrusive. There is evidence that the artists embellishing these rooms were not separate groups focusing only on their surface of specialization, but rather workshops or at least colleagues that

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[92] Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking*, 166-167.
[93] Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking*, 166-167.,Cic. *Tusc*. I.85*; Bell. Civ*. 10.112-13; *Aen*. I.726

attempted to create a harmonious interior space.[94] We can then imagine the individuals painting the ceiling knew that the homeowner expected the focus of the room to be on the vast Second Style vista looking out into a portico or on the Third Style wall and its mythological panel paintings drawn from Greek prototypes. The coffer is actually a surprisingly effective way of moving the eye to other locations. A ceiling covered in geometric coffers creates a rhythmic pattern that compels the viewer not look at one place for too long. To borrow from Alfred Gell,

> Patterns, by their multiplicity and the difficulty we have in grasping their mathematical or geometrical basis by mere visual inspection, generate relationships over time between persons and things, because what they present to mind is, cognitively speaking, always 'unfinished business.'[95]

Coffered ceilings create this unfinished business for a viewer that might lead them to focus on walls of the room instead. Ling addresses this issue in a more negative light as he considers the rhythmic effects of coffering to cause the viewer to expect more from the ceiling, yet it ends at the wall.[96] I contend instead that this was in fact the very reason why the coffer was chosen in many cases: it pulled the eye to the bread and butter, so to speak, of the room's design.

In the next section we will take a closer look at examples of coffered ceilings from Roman houses and make an attempt to apply these conclusions about the function of the coffered motif to real world examples. By taking into account not only the ceilings themselves, but their place with design ensembles we can perhaps gain a better understanding of choice to use the coffer to embellish the ceiling. It is perhaps important

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[94] Clarke, OTERO_ITEM CSL_CITATION {"citationID":"Nsd6r8IX","properties":{"formattedCitation":"{\\rtf Clarke, \\uc0\\u8220{

[95] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 80. Swift, *Style and Function in Roman Decoration*, 6.

[96] Ling, *Roman Painting*, 62.

here to emphasize that the use of the coffer was a choice, since it was not the only way to decorate a ceiling; nevertheless it remained a popular motif through the eruption of Vesuvius.

Chapter 2: The Role of Domestic Coffering

Discussing chronologies and stylistic development has great value in study of decoration, but it creates an incomplete picture without consideration of context. The coffered ceiling designs we have discussed thus far were part of lived environments and larger design ensembles that would have significantly affected their perception by a contemporary viewer. Scholars like John Clarke and Hetty Joyce have provided evidence for the development of decorative ensembles in the decoration of Roman houses. The decorated surfaces of the house were generally unified in some way to produce an overall effect on the viewer. Outside of the decoration that survives, furnishings would have played an important part in the choices made in embellishing spaces.[97] This is clear in the walls of the atrium of the Samnite House with its course of colorful stones displaced so as to be visible beyond furniture.[98] This makes particular sense in the atrium of a house as Pliny tells us that it was one of the few spaces of the house with permanent furniture like the family strongbox and the cabinet for ancestral masks.[99] The decoration of floors also reveals an awareness of the more impermanent furnishings, as when mosaic patterns in triclinia contain clear demarcations for the trio of couches. The mosaics of cubicula of the Second Style in particular are often broken into distinct sections with a blank area for the placement of a bed as in the cubiculum at Boscoreale (fig. 26).[100] It is possible that other perishable embellishments would have also added to the surviving decorations in the form of moveable wooden furniture or textiles as well. Even without many of the more fragile elements of Roman ornamentation, we are still able to gain some understanding of

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[97] Joyce, *The Decoration of Walls, Ceilings, and Floors in Italy in the Second and Third Centuries A.D*; Clarke, "Notes on the Coordination of Wall, Floor, and Ceiling Decoration in the Houses of Roman Italy, 100 BCE-235 CE."

[98] Ling, *Roman Painting*, 12–16; Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 85–93.

[99] Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture*, 16–31., Pliny *NH* 35.7

[100] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*. 64

how many of these rooms might have worked and how their design ensembles could have actually functioned. With an awareness of these principles, we will attempt to do just that in this chapter as we explore the contexts of a handful of domestic ceilings with coffered embellishments. In each case I will attempt a reconstruction of the particular space in an effort to understand what that particular coffered ceiling accomplished in that specific design ensemble.

Coffers in Second Style Cubicula: Cubiculum 11 at Oplontis and Cubiculum 16 at the Villa of the Mysteries

Cubiculum 11 at Villa A at Oplontis is an excellent example of the use of Second Style wall painting in a small room. Dated to around 40 BCE, the Second Style embellishments of this expansive seaside villa present many of the hallmarks of the mature period (fig. 27). When arriving to the villa by land, one would be treated to an axial view providing a glimpse of the immense atrium, but a visitor would have to travel through a corridor before actually entering the space.[101] Within the atrium, the tall walls treat a viewer to a vast illusionistic portico scene. Complete with imitation painted doors with stairs inviting the viewer to enter, stately *imagines clipeatae* hang from the walls. All of these details are rendered in striking colors evoking gold, bronze, and expensive foreign marbles. Should the visitor have gained the owner's permission, they may have had the opportunity to explore the more private areas of the house, including cubiculum 11. West of the atrium there is a corridor, or perhaps it is the right-hand *ala,* leading to the small room. The room shares a wall with the atrium and had two entrances. The entrance immediately off the corridor leads into the room, while the other opens into oecus 12. The room also preserves a large window looking into peristyle 19. Both of the

[101] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*. 113

portals and the window have their wooden doors and shutters preserved in plaster casts by the excavators (fig. 28). Two niches on the north and east walls survive, both vaulted and decorated with rich Second Style schemes. As is typical of cubicula of this style the mosaics patterns differentiate the room into two major zones: circulating and non-circulating.[102] Two *scendiletti*, or mosaic bands, define the areas of the niches. One presents monochromatic triangles and the other is an alternating scheme of diamonds and squares done in bright colors. The decoration of one of the lunettes of the north niche survives, though it is in poor condition. Archival photos and careful drawings reveal a scene of people along a river or harbor with buildings, the regular cast of characters found in other landscapes representing the Nile.[103] Ivo van der Graff has recently argued that such an image would have evoked the safety of harbor, a comforting image in a bedroom space.[104]

One can imagine this room as exceptionally comfortable in the warm months of the year with its three openings allowing for the cross-circulation of breezes. The two doors and window would have also let in for excellent natural light creating for a good situation for viewing the many close details of the walls. Each niche has its own decorative scheme, providing different views when utilized for sleeping. It is doubtful that views into the sacred precincts would have been highly perceptible should one use the niches for sleeping. Instead of the walls, the coffers would then become the focal point of viewing.

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[102] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 6; Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 66; Scagliarini, "Spazio E Decorazione Nella Pittura Pompeiana."
[103] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 121–122.
[104] van der Graaff, "The Recovered Tympanum of Cubiculum 11 at Villa A ('of Poppaea') at Oplontis (Torre Annunziata, Italy): A New Document for the Study of City Walls."

Resting on a bed in one of the niches would have provided a rather immersive experience for the sleeper. With the bed placed along the wall, the trompe l'oeil temple facades would be too close to be fully appreciated. What this angle does provide is uninterrupted view of the "flatter" decorations of the lateral walls and the coffered decorations of the vaulting. In the north niche, the lateral walls are decorated with aediculae that seem to open out into blue sky with spare vegetation and what appears to be a low fence. Looking up from a sleeping or reclining position here would give the viewer the impression that he/she was staring out into an expanse, perhaps over the sea. Looking up would reveal a view of illusionistic coffers perhaps creating a feeling of being under some sacred canopy fit for the surrounding temple architecture. The other niche provides a different set of experiences, as the lateral walls do not depict blue vistas, but walls of precious stones. Looking up one sees the coffered ceiling again, slightly different with only long rectangular lacunars emphasizing the arch. At first glance, this niche may seem a bit more claustrophobic than the experience of the north niche as it lacks the illusionistic views. Yet a simple turn away from the wall offers this reclining Roman a direct view to large window spanning nearly the entire west wall. Perhaps this was the intention of the painters as they strove to create a space where neither niche would be favored.

Oplontis Villa A's little Second Style room offers a wealth of information on how a design ensemble could work to produce a comfortable and pleasurable space for a visitor throughout the day. In this ensemble, the coffered vaults played an important part in the creation of a sense of both sacrality and luxury. The coffer would have benefited the small stature of the room by injecting a lofty characteristic to the rather cramped niches. This was further enhanced by the inclusion of long rectangular lacunar spanning nearly the whole vault.

Cubiculum 16 from the Villa of the Mysteries provides a unique opportunity to compare and contrast the design choices of the Second Style within cubicula. Overall, the illusionistic decoration of this room is less welcoming than that in Oplontis. Whereas in cubiculum 11 the two niches are painted with views out into porticos, cubiculum 16 presents the viewer with walls and sealed doors. There are only glimpses of what might be going on beyond the wall, like in the top of a tholos in one niche. Only one survives in this room and it exhibits a completely different style of ceiling design from Oplontis. Here we have a latticework design that prefigures the so-called *Tapetenmuster*, or wallpaper style of the Fourth Style (fig. 29). As it is likely that this style itself was influenced by coffered designs, we can perhaps theorize that this example is the type of coffering that influenced the later walls.[105] The east niche creates a nice effect for the viewer looking in with its three painted coffered arches. These arches echo the niche's vault and seem to create some continuity between real and imagined within the cubiculum.

A Third Style Coffered Ceiling: Room 8 at the House of the Cabinetmaker

The dramatic shift from the Second to the Third Style saw what some scholars have identified as a move from the illusionistic to the ornamental.[106] No longer are artists concerned with 'truth', but rather with the creation of a sort of organized fiction. Thus, we see some ceiling design schemes completely abandoning the lacunary motif in favor painted designs with a central focus or all-over vegetal motifs. As we can see in these examples from the House of Caius Julius Polybius and the House of Casca Longus in Pompeii, these ceiling types lack the ability to move the eye because they do not produce a recognizable pattern for the brain to follow (figs. 30 and 31). The example from the

[105] Ling, *Roman Painting*, 85–90.
[106] Ling, *Roman Painting*, 52; Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 125–126.

House of Julius Polybius adorns a vault in room FF, an antechamber between cubiculum II and garden peristyle.[107] On the vault, painted *thyrsi* create a star pattern framing a central panel containing an *oenochoe*. The design of this ceiling is clearly more in line with Third-Style wall painting as the elegant thyrsi evoke the thin architectural features characteristic of wall decoration. The painted decoration from the House of Casca Longus decorates the segmental vault at the center of a larger ceiling scheme.[108] It depicts a random assortment of blooming flowers on a red ground with central figure of Venus and Erotes.[109] This painting is clearly meant to be the focal point of the ceiling, drawing the attention of the viewer. One can imagine the surprise felt when looking at the swath of flowers only to find a rather nondescript stucco image of the goddess at the center.

The most obvious references to the coffer exist in painted ceilings with complex geometrical motifs like those in room 8 of the House of the Cabinetmaker in Pompeii (fig. 32).[110] Alix Barbet asserts that the ceiling would have had two zones, one flat and the other slightly vaulted.[111] Ling, however, asserts that there is not enough evidence to support this claim and it is only clear that the ceiling had two different levels.[112] The walls were decorated in the Third Style with a black socle containing a vegetal motif, a red central zone with basic architectural forms and central panels, and a red upper zone with more architectural features. The floors were in *opus signinum* with limestone inserts. There were three central panels and the best preserved is on the north wall and likely

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[107] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 158–160.
[108] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 147–149.
[109] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*,147, Bastet and De Vos, *Proposta per Una Classificazione Del Terzo Stile Pompeiano*, 4: 86.
[110] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 140–143; Ling and Arthur, *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii*, 150–170.
[111] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 140.
[112] Ling and Arthur, *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii*, 152.

depicts the Carthaginian myth of the *Sacrifice of Sophonisba*.[113] The only other panel preserving any decoration is the one on the west wall, but it is heavily damaged and only shows a draped male figure.[114] The function of the room is also controversial with Elia and Barbet arguing for its identification as a triclinium, but Ling considering it a cubiculum that likely fell out of use after the earthquake [115]

The ceiling itself is highly fragmentary, but both zones preserve black ground painting with coffered design schemes constructed of a mixture of square and lozenge lacunars. The higher zone of the ceiling contained larger coffers, while the lower zone contained smaller coffers. In the lower zone, the grid of square coffers had the space between the squares filled with stars made of eight small lozenges. In both zones, the coffers had painted rosettes in their centers. There is also evidence of larger square coffers in both zones with mythological figures. In the upper zone there would have been a central image of Victory, while the lower zone likely had five square coffers with various figures within. Ling hypothesizes that these types of ceilings were probably drawing inspiration from the mosaic floors of the late Second Style.[116] Barbet, on the other hand, posits that these new forms were influenced by the importation of new types of foreign textiles from afar.[117]

As the decoration of the room's walls and floors is rather nondescript, looking at the ceiling here is the best way to understand its function. Elia argues that proximity of the room to the kitchen and its opening out into the peristyle make it a clear candidate for a triclinium, while Barbet adds that the lower ceiling zone with its intricate motif would

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113 R.L., *Pompei Pitture E Mosaici*, 403.
114 R.L., *Pompei Pitture E Mosaici*, 406.
115 Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 149; Elia, "Pompei - Relazione Sullo Scavo dell'Insula X Della Regio I," 282; Ling and Arthur, *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii*, 152.
116 Ling, *Roman Painting*, 67-68.
117 Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 174.

have been more interesting for a diner.[118] Ling patently rejects these ideas based primarily on the narrow width of the room that would have only been able to fit two normal size dining couches.[119] He also brings the ceiling in, arguing that the higher ceiling zone would have made more sense for diners, if there had been any, and the lower zone would be used by slaves to serve guests. I am inclined to follow Ling in this assessment. Another issue I find with Barbet's argument in particular is the assertion that a diner preferred looking at a densely packed low ceiling over a vault with a central image. Barbet is likely placing too much faith in the notion that an ancient Roman viewer would have been engrossed by the geometric patterns of such a ceiling. I think it is more plausible that this type of ceiling was intended to excite the eye, but ultimately to bring the viewer to the walls with their mythological panel paintings.

Two Fourth-Style Coffer Types: Room R at the House of the Golden Cupids and Room F at the House of Octavius Quartio

By the time the Fourth Style was fully crystallized, the decoration of ceilings in Roman houses was quite varied. The Fourth Style ushered in a breakdown of the division between ceiling and wall decoration that would continue into the second century.[120] Ceilings were mostly focused on a central point with extravagant decoration radiating outward and utilizing the same visual vocabulary as walls. The Fourth Style also ushers in the evolution of the segmental vault into complex multilevel geometric shapes in ceilings. These "plafonds a déchrochements" created plays of light and shadow impossible in earlier ensembles while also allowing for the proliferation of the stucco

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[118] Ibid., 149; Elia, "Pompei - Relazione Sullo Scavo dell'Insula X Della Regio I," 282; Ling and Arthur, *The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii*, 152.
[119] Ling, *Roman Painting*, 152.
[120] Joyce, *The Decoration of Walls, Ceilings, and Floors in Italy in the Second and Third Centuries A.D*, 99–102.

molding throughout the ceiling surface.[121] Most ceiling decoration contained some geometric shape that likely had its roots in the historic coffer, but there are two examples where it appears most explicit. The decoration of the vault of room r at the House of the Golden Cupids reveals stucco coffered scheme with vibrant colors and organic forms with possible references to the designs popular at the emperor's court (fig. 33). Room F at the House of Octavius Quartio reveals an advanced form of an old coffer type with three-level geometric indentations that recall lozenges circumscribed by rectangles that were so popular in the Second Style (fig. 16).

Room r at the House of the Golden Cupids is just one of the extravagantly decorated spaces in this impressive Pompeian house.[122] The walls are decorated in the Fourth Style with a red socle, a yellow central zone with central panels, and a white upper zone.[123] There are three central panels depicting Leda and the swan, Aphrodite fishing, and Artemis and Actaeon (fig. 34).[124] The floor is done in cocciopesto with inset white tesserae to create a simple pattern of woven bricks (fig. 35).[125] The entire ceiling was vaulted and decorated with luxurious stuccowork depicting a grid of twenty-five square coffers with various shapes inscribed within them. The stucco designs are richly colored and were likely quite expensive to create.[126] The surviving interior designs reveal intricately painted scenes completely different from motifs seen in earlier coffered designs. There is a rearing stag with a garland, a selection of maritime creatures, a male panther, and a depiction of a maritime villa.[127] There was a central image as well, but it is

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121 Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 253–255.
122 Seiler, *Casa Degli Amorini Dorati*; Powers, "Patrons, Houses and Viewers in Pompeii: Reconsidering the House of the Gilded Cupids."
123 Seiler, *Pompei Pitture E Mosaici*, 833.
124 Seiler, *Pompei Pitture E Mosaici*, 828.
125 Seiler, *Pompei Pitture E Mosaici*, 831.
126 Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 219–220.
127 Seiler, *Pompei Pitture E Mosaici*, 843.

heavily damaged so that all that remains is a pair wings. It was possibly a winged goddess as was common.

The use of coffering here may serve several functions in such a room. As Barbet points out, this type of decoration in stucco is an excellent choice when covering large spaces that are meant for quick travel.[128] Though we have not covered them here, coffering in plaster was a decorative choice for cryptoporticus.[129] In these contexts, however, the stucco is often left unpainted. Ling explains the use of unpainted stucco as a means of creating plays of light and shadow, but it is also likely that such areas were simply not meant for close consideration.[130] The decoration of the vault at the House of the Golden Cupids is a stark contrast to those more utilitarian embellishments. Placed in a relatively small room, this vault was clearly meant for viewing. The inclusion of vibrant colors and individualized painted scenes within the coffers would have captivated a viewer. Should this room have functioned as a cubiculum as is likely, we can once again see the importance of ceilings in a space for sleeping.[131] Lying in bed, one could ponder the detailed decoration of the vault fully, yet during waking hours one would be able to appreciate the fashionable panel decoration adorning the walls.

Room F at the House of Octavius Quartio offers a different picture of how the coffer was transformed in the Fourth Style. Where as in previous uses, the coffer form had been flattened out, this room reveals the tendency to do just the opposite. Here, the coffer form becomes the template for creating deep indentations in the ceiling that changed way this surface was perceived by a visitor.

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[128] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 220.
[129] Cryptoporticus are covered, vaulted corridors that support upper levels. Coffered examples are found in the House of the Cryptoporticus in Pompeii and in cryptoporticus 70 of the Domus Aurea.
[130] Ling, *Roman Painting*, 42.
[131] Seiler, *Casa Degli Amorini Dorati*, 55.

The House of Octavius Quartio is often cited as evidence of the freedman's longing to imitate the luxury of the suburban villa he could not own.[132] Following the earthquake, this house was renovated to add an immense garden complex complete with extravagant water features meant to evoke a luxurious paradise. The house also appears in discussions of the worship of the Egyptian mystery cults in ancient Rome.[133] Of particular interest on this front is the channel in the gardens that may imitate the Nile and the so-called *sacellum* room. The *sacellum* is more correctly referred to as diaeta f. This small room has no clear function, but scholars have drawn conclusions about a possible religious use for the space. This conclusion comes primarily from the specifics of the room's Fourth Style decoration, particularly an image of what seems to be a priest of Isis (fig. 36). There is also a hole in one of the walls that some scholars have identified as a niche that may have held some sort of religious implements or statues, though John Clarke asserts that this hole is likely the remains of a removed painted panel.[134]

For our purposes, we are not interested in the possible Egyptian connections of the homeowner and this "*sacellum*." Instead, we shall focus on the ceiling decoration, part of a specific type of Fourth Style design only appearing in a handful of extant ceilings (fig. 37). This category of ceiling is marked by a flat ceiling plane with indentations in the plaster consisting of multiple levels.[135] Though the ceiling in diaeta f is highly fragmentary, enough survives to allow some understanding. Someone visiting the house today sees a reconstruction with a large central rectangular indentation surrounded by eight others. The rectangles at the four corners have been reconstructed from one

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[132] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 193–201.
[133] Turcan, "The Isis Campensis of Katja Lembke."
[134] Wild, *Water in the Cultic Worship of Isis and Sarapis*; Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 194.
[135] Barbet, *La Peinture Murale Romaine*, 253-254.

surviving example. In these four, we are able to see the influence of the coffer on this design. A lozenge within a rectangle should remind us immediately of designs like the mosaic fragments from Tusculum (fig. 16). Barbet hypothesizes that other rectangles may have held further indentations or segmental vaults, but they do not survive.[136]

Coffers like this provide different benefits to the design of a room such as this. It is apparent when looking into the room that the stuccoed crossbeams of the ceiling line up with the vertical zones of wall painting. This creates a harmonious composition within the room itself. The surviving fragments of paint from the ceiling are white ground with garlands similar to those utilized on the walls. Once again, we see how the Fourth Style brings the walls and ceilings together. The large indentations also create panel-like areas that would have echoed those on the walls to further the effect. Though they have largely disappeared from this room, all of the edges of the geometric shapes would have been lined with painted stucco moldings.[137]

A New Fourth Style Ceiling at Oplontis Villa A

Recent work at Villa A at Oplontis has revealed striking new evidence for a heretofore-unpublished ceiling of the advanced Fourth Style.[138] In the summer of 2014, the Oplontis Project discovered over 4,000 fresco fragments from walls and ceilings along with over 40 pieces of stucco molding. These fragments were stored from the last Italian excavations of the site, terminating in 1983, but were never published or described. After close examination of these fragments, archaeologists from the University of Texas at Austin were able to deduce that the majority came from the west wing of the villa, along the pool. From the tags and labels remaining from the previous excavators it

136 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
138 Castillo, forthcoming

became apparent that the bulk of the ceiling fragments originated from room 89, a rather unassuming space. Among these were the evidence of two large medallions with approximate diameters of 60 cm as well as indications of lozenge-shaped lacunars and a segmental vault.

Room 89 presents several issues and has not received a great deal of scholarly attention. Its function was likely fairly important as it exists in the most lavish region of the villa alongside the pool. It is also the only surviving room in the complex preserving an apse. This apse includes a window, complete with marble sill, looking out into one of the light wells shared with oecus 74. There is perhaps some connection between this room at oecus 74 as its ceiling was reconstructed as an advanced Fourth Style ceiling from fragments very similar to those found in 89. Even considering this, 89 is comparatively plain with only monochromatic painting leaving no trace of further embellishment. Coupled with the white fragment of the ceiling, the room would have contrasted significantly with rich red ochre fresco of the garden and the detailed Fourth Style painting of the adjacent porticus.

What I hope these various examples accomplished is to make clear the coffer's effect on all manners of ceiling design in Roman domestic design ensembles. With its roots in the rote imitation of the Masonry Style, the ancient Romans were able to take the simple form of the coffer and innovate to create particularly Roman element. The coffer thus becomes more than an architectural element for imitation, but something imbued with layers and layers of Roman life from religion, to politics, to the carefully planned designs of the multifaceted house.

Conclusion

In this study I have attempted to highlight the role the coffer played in the private lives of Romans and how it may have developed into a multivalent symbol of culture, power, and design. Roman culture had a deep connection with carefully crafted self-representation and the house was one of the best ways for an individual to broadcast his wealth and worldliness to his community. The coffer was part of a tradition of illusionism that was at least as old as Rome by the time of First Style. The ancient Roman was not concerned with this fact, however, and imitation was embraced as long it was done well. To imitate well was not to create a fake or a knock off, but to reveal one's awareness of how the world worked. Even more, by fitting disparate pieces of art and design together in the house, a Roman could emphasize his or her learning and experience.

The coffer motif did not only work within illusionistic design schemes, however; it also served a distinct function as a kind of visual expedient. Repeating motifs are used in cultures throughout the world's history as a means of encouraging movement and dictating access. Ceiling designs with coffers also served this function to move the viewer to points in the embellishment of the room that may have been more desirable, like detailed Greek panel paintings. Liminal spaces, such as entranceways, and areas that necessitated movement, like cryptoporticus, also made use of the coffer. Here, the repeating geometric motifs would have encouraged the viewer not to linger in one area for too long. It is therefore rare to find especially detailed motifs or scenes included within coffered ceiling designs. Looking up one would instead experience a set of stock motifs that would discourage close looking and compel one's movement.

This thesis has certainly left many things untouched in regard to the subject of the coffer. Of the greatest significance is perhaps the role of the coffer in public architecture. Lacunars maintained their popularity not only temples, but in civic buildings like basilicas. Why was the coffer fit for these contexts and why did it last throughout the Republic and Empire? The Roman proclivity for imitating the art of the Greek is likely to blame here, but this motif took on a life of its own when it entered a Roman context. As we have seen, Roman artists were keen on innovating and created new and exciting ways to embellish ceilings that eschewed the coffer, but it remained the gold standard for portraying power to the Roman public. My study has also only focused on the use of the coffer in the private spaces of the Roman house. In these contexts, the coffer was often a means to specific ends for the homeowner. Lacunary decoration also appears in places like cryptoporticus and baths just as often, if not more so, than in private rooms. Though this study briefly touches on the place of the coffer within monumental arches, there is certainly much more to be said. Using the coffer within the specifics of these monuments underscores their importance and possibly reinforces their effect as dictators of movement. These arches were, after all, markers of procession and often include imagery that supports the idea of movement.

The arch with a coffered vault is also a product of Roman innovation, since the coffer itself was bent to fit a shape that its real-world counterparts, carved in wood or stone, could not easily accommodate. We must also remember that the ceilings I have presented here only represent small section of the vast chronology of Roman interior designs. There are many ceilings that survive from after the eruption of Vesuvius and

there is certainly more work to be done regarding how the embellishment of ceilings evolved as the empire grew and changed.

A significant lacuna exists in our understanding of the role of the coffer in domestic contexts: the lack of surviving wooden coffers. Recently, archaeologists working in Herculaneum made a startling discovery when they found the remains of a lavish ceiling from the House of the Telephus Relief. The findings have not yet been formally published, though various press releases have included images of reconstructed wooden coffers revealing a high level of craftsmanship and a use of color that confirms that painted depictions were inspired by real examples (fig. 12). The room that this ceiling may have originally covered, the Hall of the Greek Marbles, is extravagantly decorated with marble on both floors and walls. We still do not know just how precious these coffers were and if their inclusion in a house in Herculaneum indicates a more widespread use in other houses. To be sure, the real wooden coffer was the exception when considering that our corpus of imitation coffered ceilings comes from the homes of even the wealthiest Romans. We can already make out a difference in the small numbers of wooden coffers found and the majority of illusionistic examples. The precious nature the wooden ceilings is heightened by the possible use of gold and the fine detail work done for an eye-catching effect. The great majority of coffering that we have studied includes simple inner motifs, but the ceiling from the House of the Telephus Relief would have been an awe-inspiring work of art.

With all of this in mind, there are still many more things to be said about illusionistic coffering and Roman ceiling embellishment as a whole. These surfaces must

be considered in their function as decoration for lofty surfaces of the room and not simply an extension of the wall. The diversity of design reveals their importance to artists and decorators, and though their poor survival rate may hinder us, we can plainly see that glancing upward was much more to Roman than we may think.

Appendix

Figure 1: First Style wall painting, Samnite House, Herculaneum, after DASE

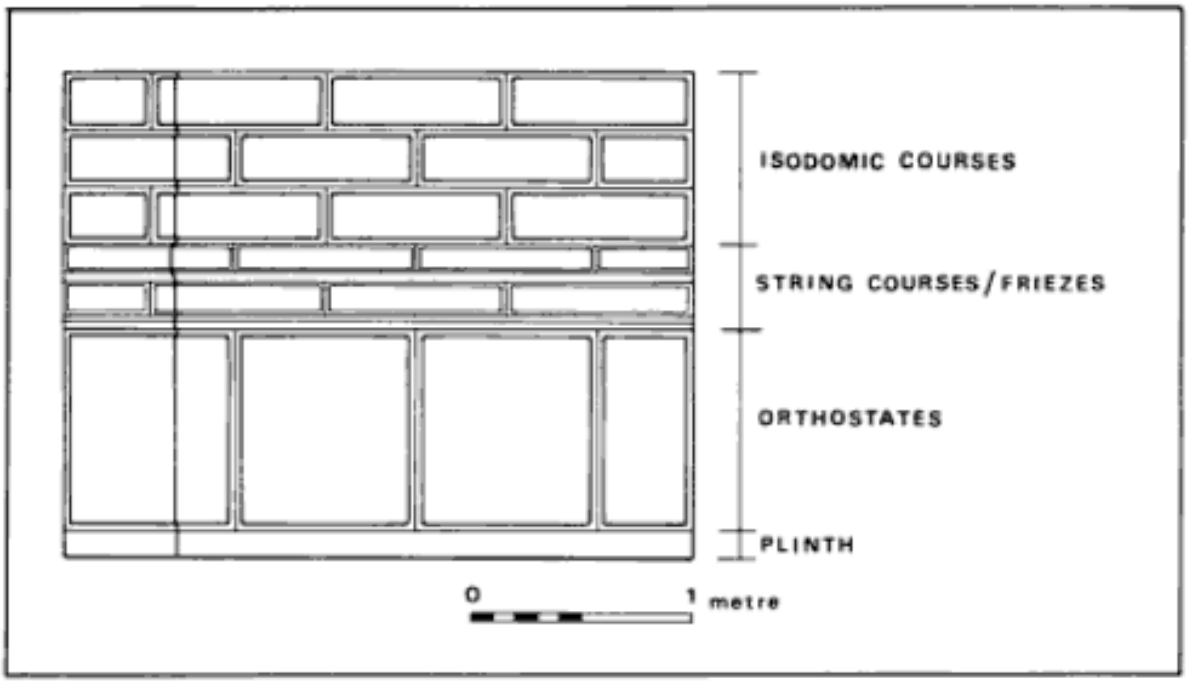

Figure 2: First Style wall painting diagram, after Ling 1991

Figure 3: Oecus 15, Oplontis Villa A, after DASE

Figure 4: Cubiculum 11, Oplontis Villa A, after DASE

Figure 5; Tablinum, House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto, Pompeii, after DASE

Figure 6: Room h, House of Octavius Quartio, Pompeii, after DASE

Figure 7: Ixion Room, House of the Vettii, Pompeii, after DASE

Figure 8: Garden painting from the Villa of Livia, Rome, after DASE

Figure 9: Garden painting from Oplontis Villa A, after DASE

Figure 10: Oecus in the House of the Golden Bracelet, Pompeii, after DASE

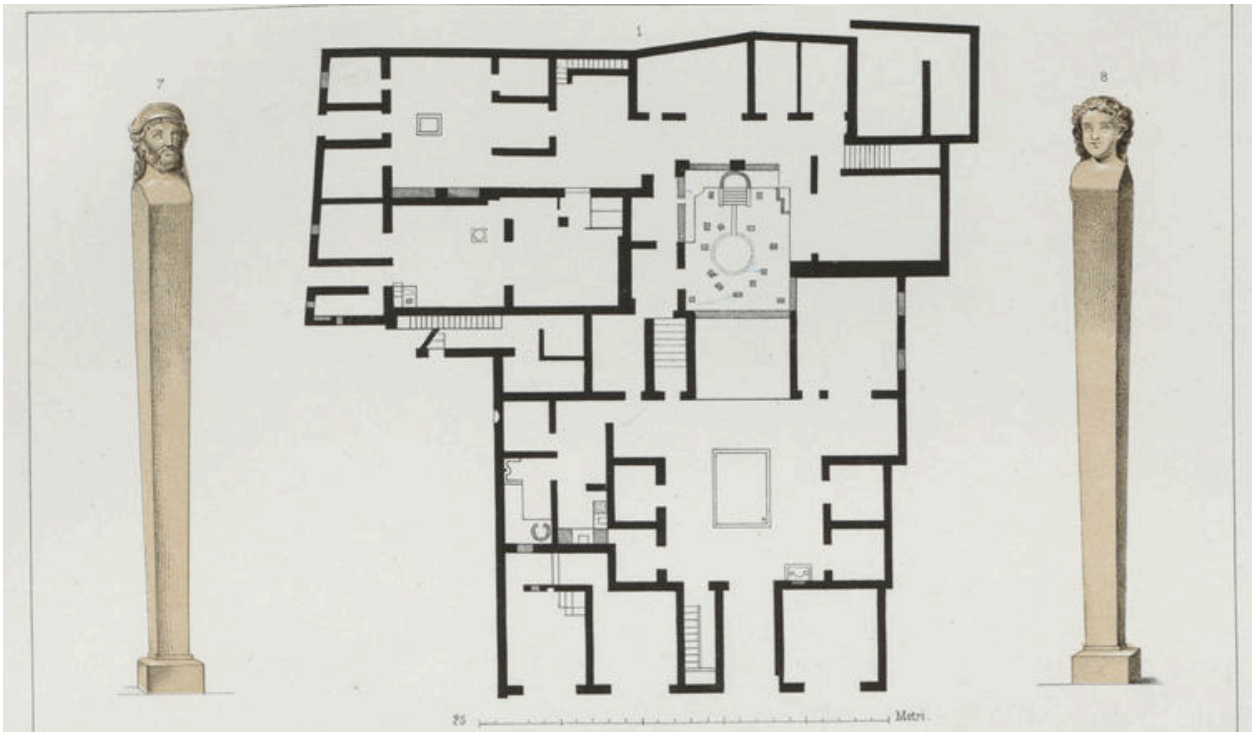

Figure 11: Plan of the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto with illustrations of herms, after Niccolini 1854

Figure 12: Wooden coffer from the House of Telephus, Herculaneum, after *Current World Archaeology* (http://www.world-archaeology.com/more/raising-the-roof-on-the-house-of-the-telephus-relief.htm)

Figure 13: First Style mosaic floor, Samnite House, Herculaneum, after DASE

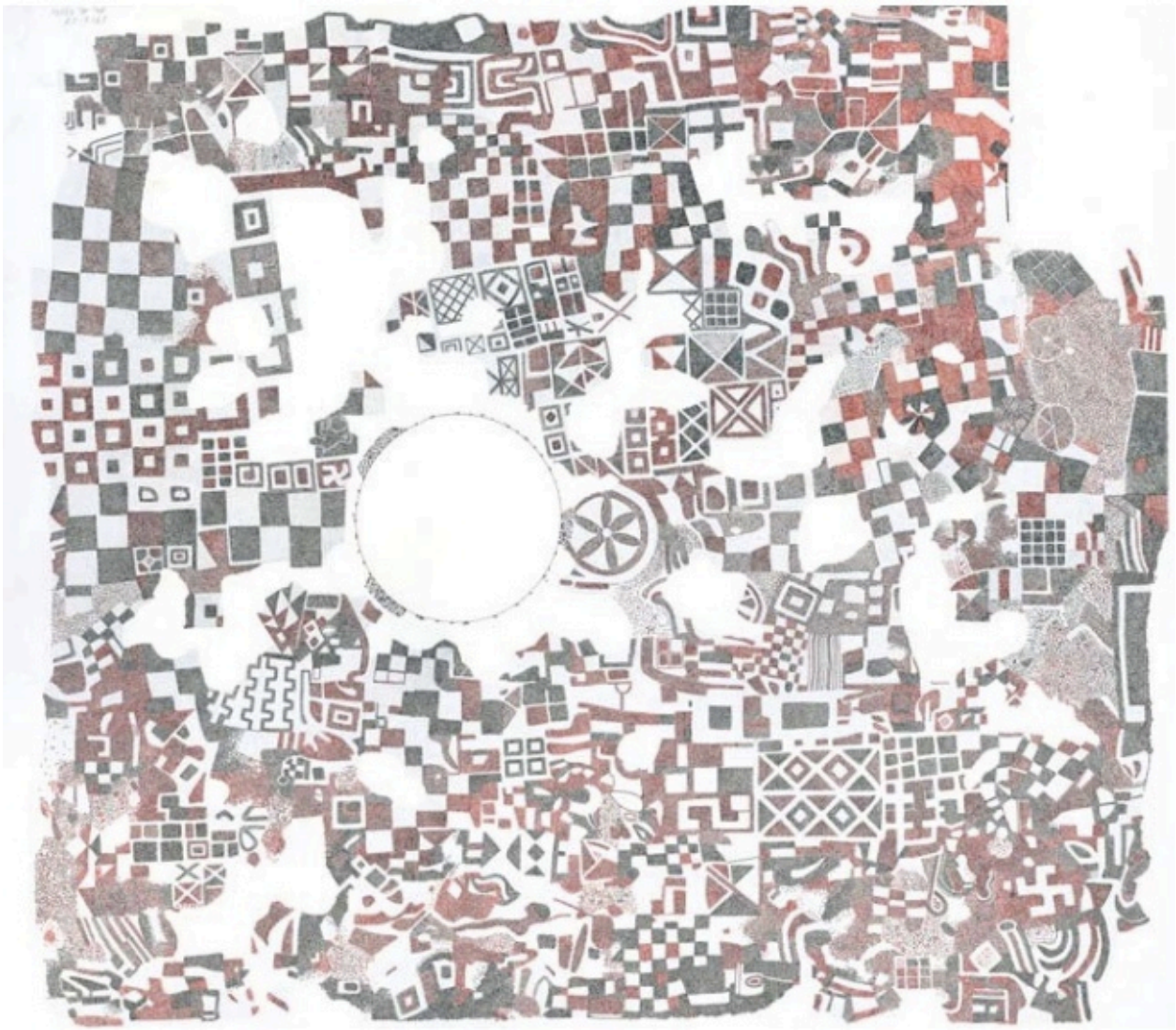

Figure 14: Mosaic floor from Gordion, after Ling 1998

Figure 15: "Unswept Floor" mosaic, Vatican Museums, after DASE

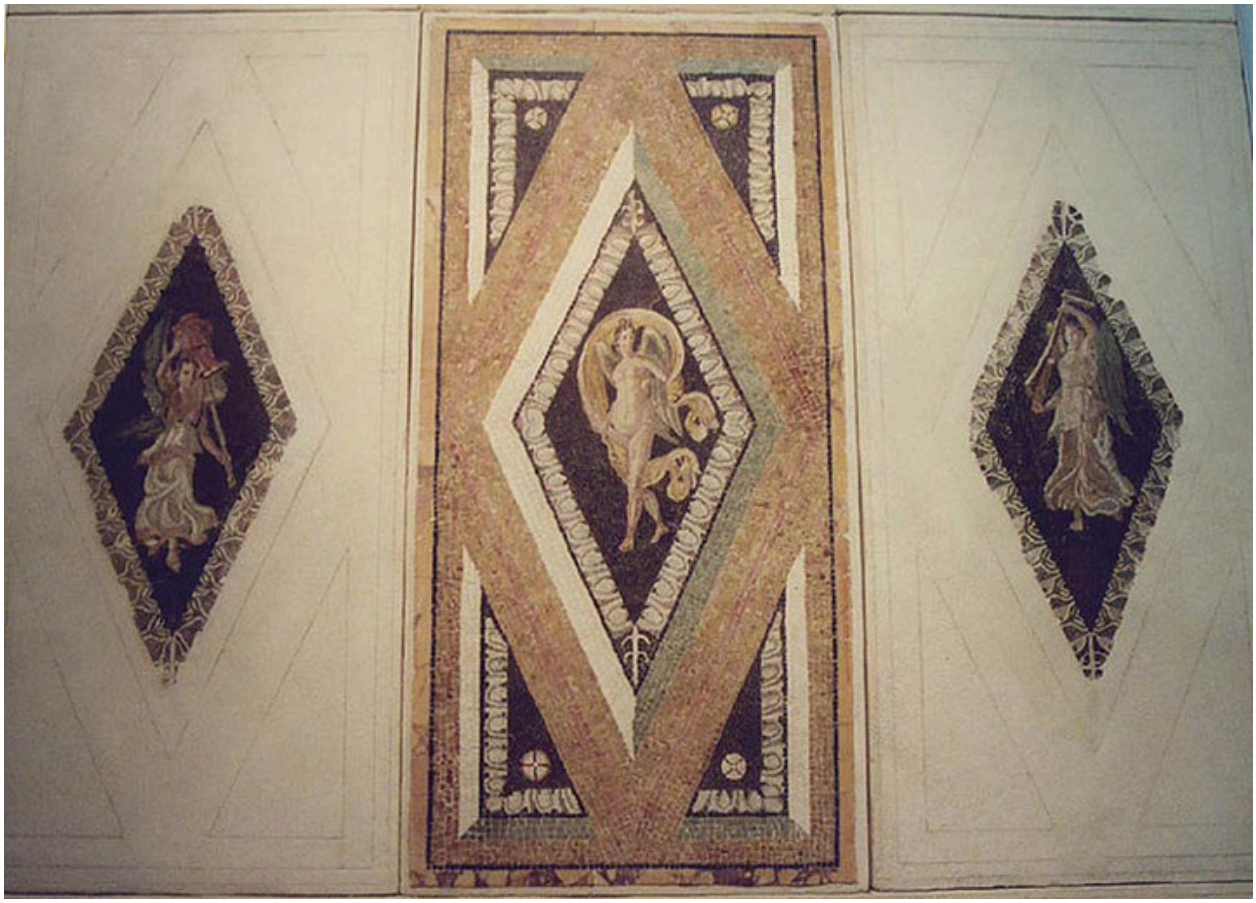

Figure 16: Mosaic with coffer design scheme from Tusculum, after Ipernity (http://www.ipernity.com/doc/laurieannie/25608969)

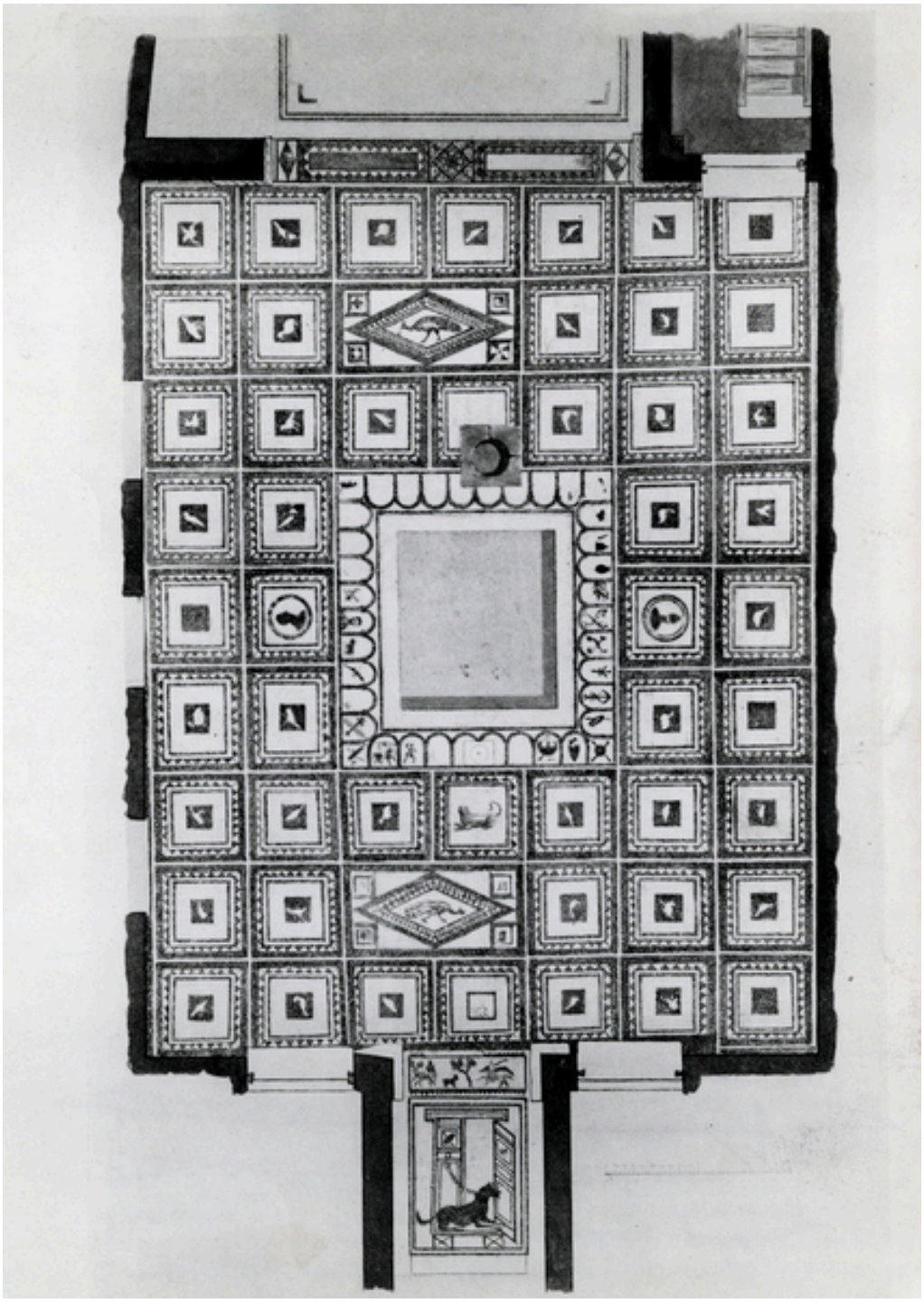

Figure 17: Atrium mosaic floor, House of Paquius Proculus, Pompeii, after DASE

Figure 18: Stucco vault from the House of the Griffins on the Palatine Hill, after Ipernity (http://www.ipernity.com/doc/laurieannie/35822341)

Figure 19: Stucco vault from the House of the Griffins on the Palatine Hill, after Ipernity (http://www.ipernity.com/doc/laurieannie/35822339)

Figure 20: Cubiculum 11 at Oplontis Villa A, vault of east alcove, after DASE

Figure 21: Cubiculum 16 at the Villa of the Mysteries, vault of east alcove, after DASE

Figure 22: Fauces ceiling, Samnite House, Herculaneum, after DASE

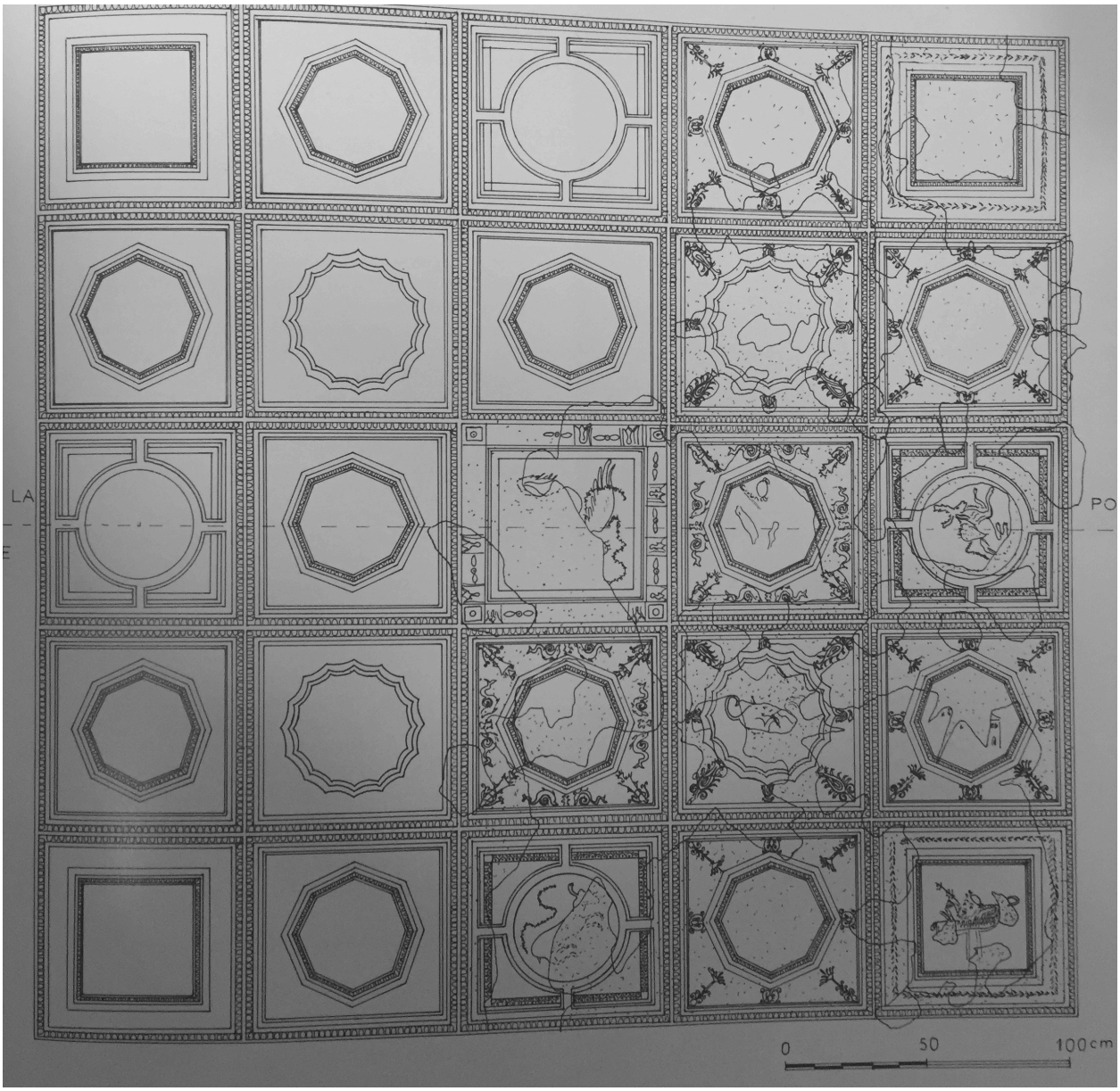

Figure 23: Vault of room r, House of the Gilded Cupids, Pompeii, after Barbet 1991

Figure 24: "Sacellum," House of Octavius Quartio, Pompeii, after DASE

Figure 25 Coffered ceiling from the Erechtheion, Athens, after Frantzi 2011

Figure 26: Cubiculum from Boscoreale, after DASE

Figure 27: Digital reconstruction of cubiculum 11, Oplontis Villa A, after the Oplontis Project

Figure 28: Plaster cast of window in cubiculum 11, Oplontis Villa A, after DASE

Figure 29: Wallpaper fresco from diaeta 9, Villa Arianna, Stabiae, after DASE

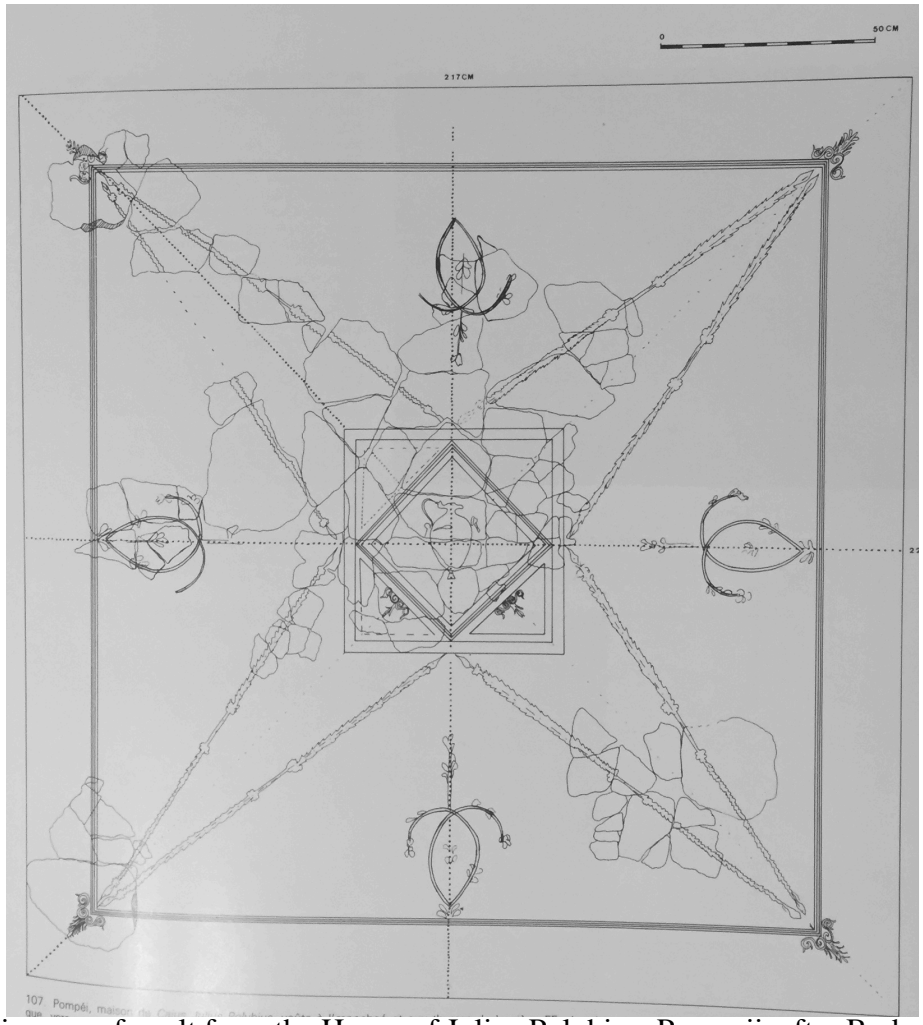

Figure 30: Diagram of vault from the House of Julius Polybius, Pompeii, after Barbet 1991

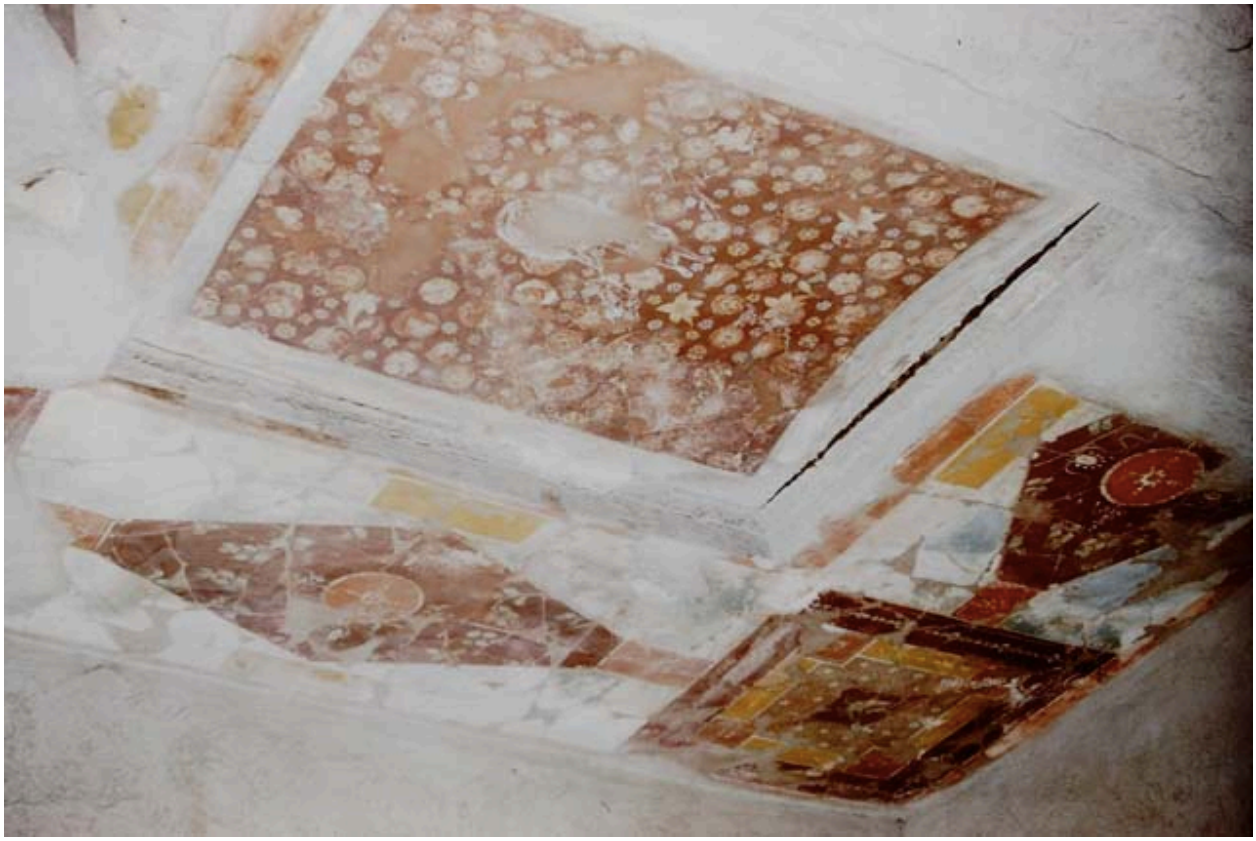

Figure 31: Ceiling from cubiculum in the House of Casca Longus, Pompeii, after *Pompeii in Pictures* (http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1..html)

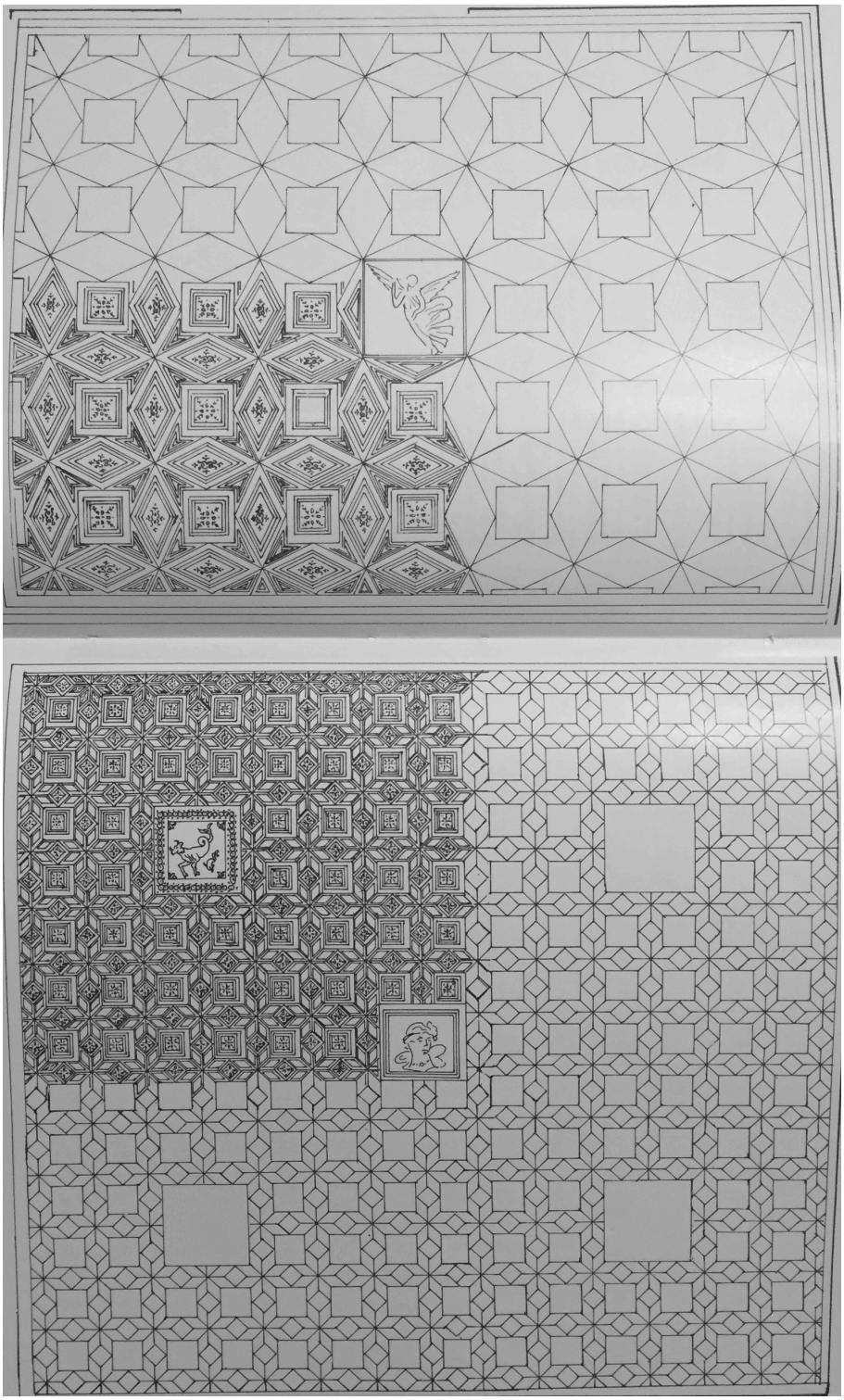

Figure 32: Ceiling from cubiculum in the House of the Cabinetmaker, Pompeii, after Barbet 1991

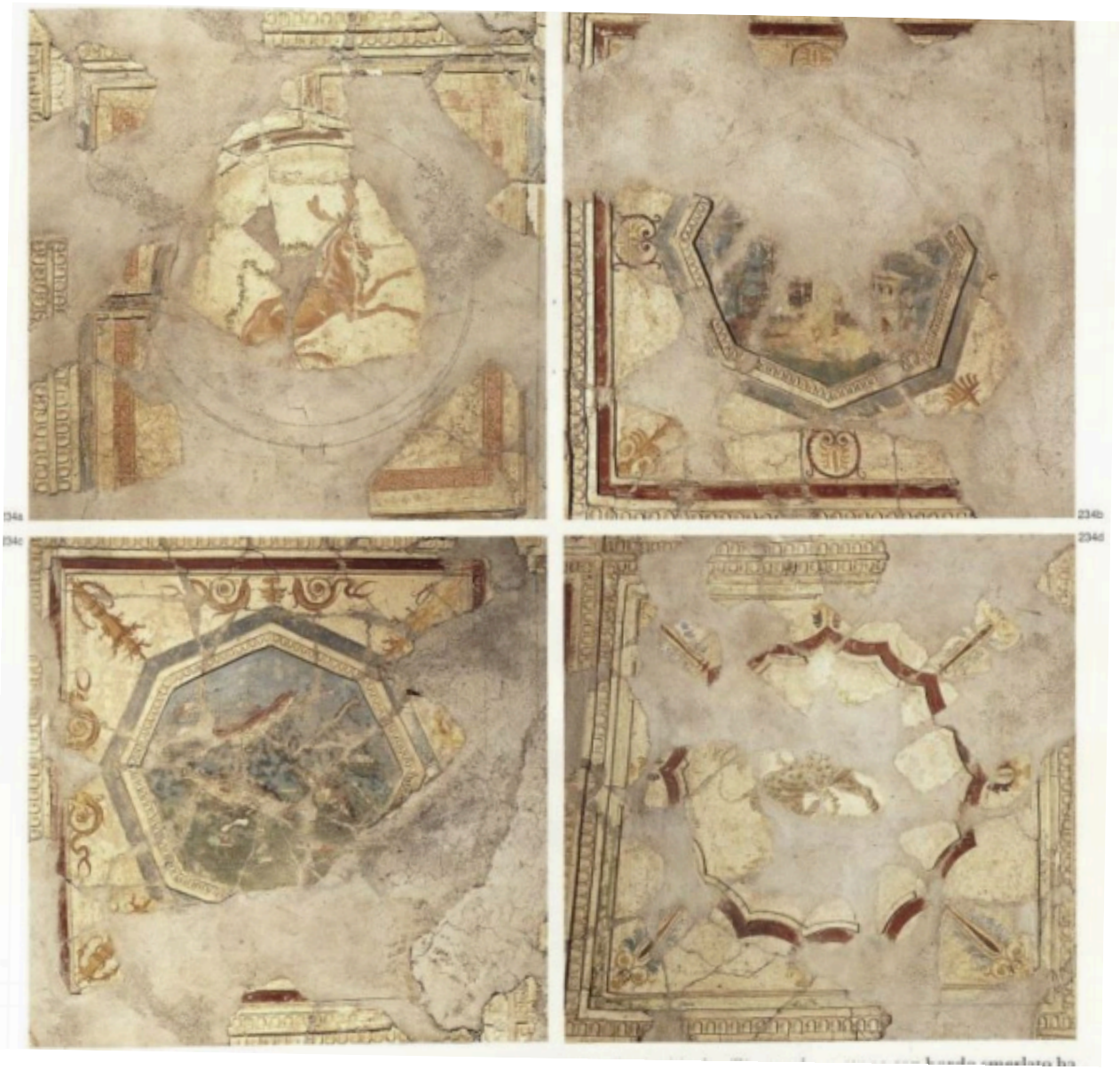

Figure 33; Vault of room r in the House of the Gilded Cupids, after *Pompeii: Pitture e mosaici*, 1990, Vol. II

Figure 34; Panel painting from room r in the House of the Gilded Cupids, after DASE

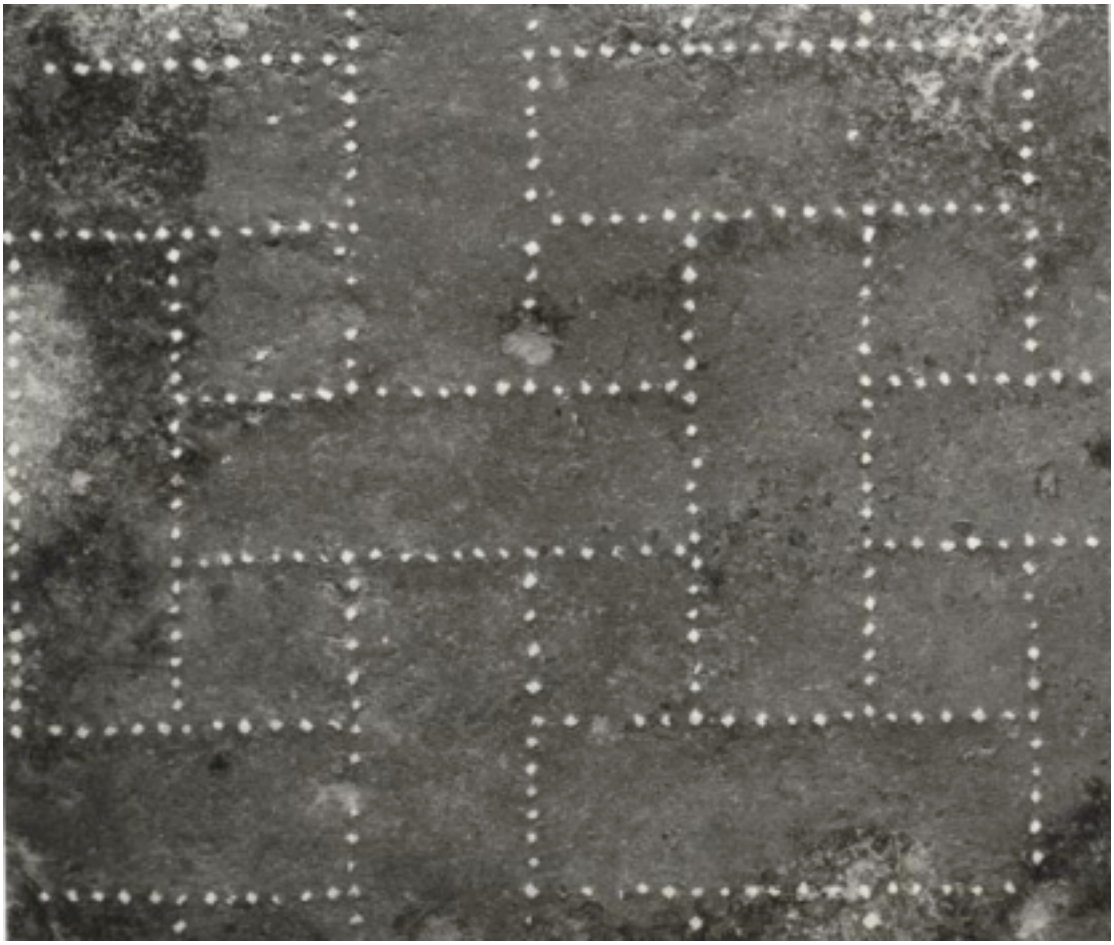

Figure 35: *Opus signinum* floor from room r in the House of the Gilded Cupids, after *Pompeii: Pitture e mosaici*, 1990, Vol. II

Figure 36: Priest of Isis from the "sacellum" in the House of Octavius Quartio, Pompeii, after DASE

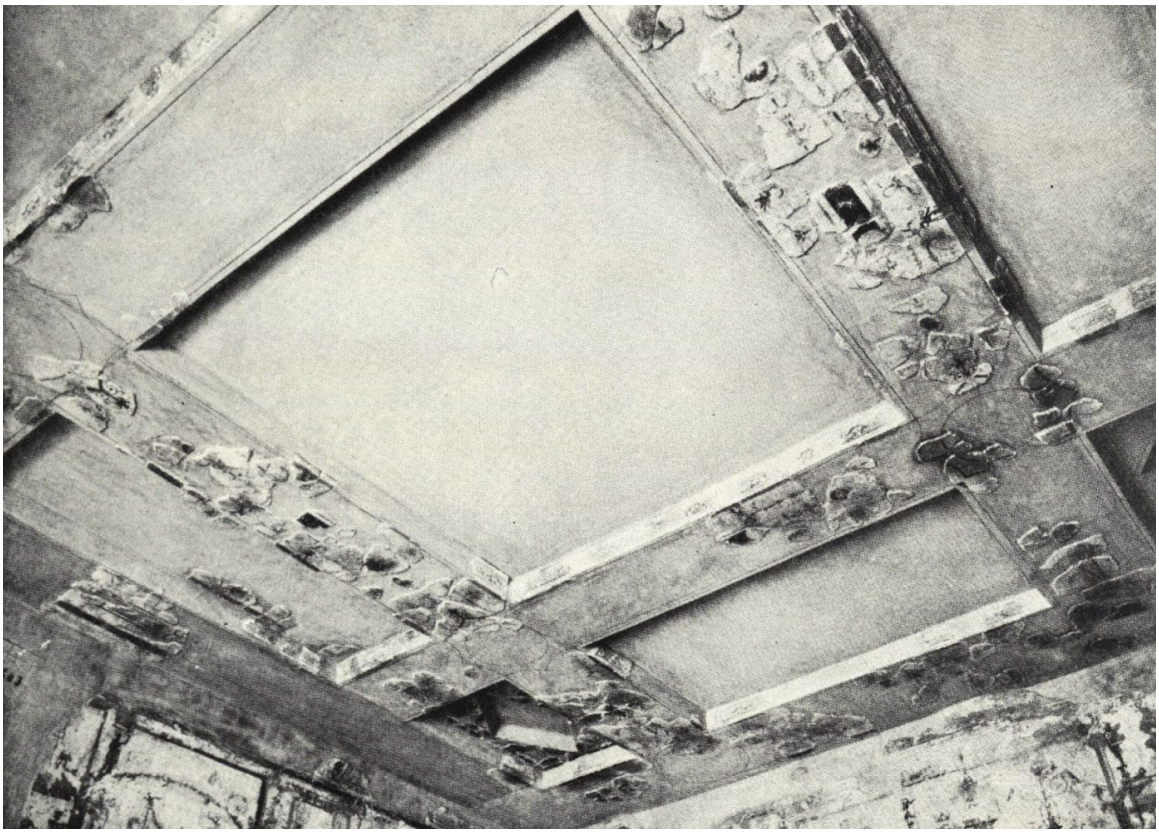

Figure 37: Ceiling from room F of the House of Octavius Quartio, Pompeii, after Barbet 1991

Figure 38: Ceiling fragment from room 89 at Oplontis Villa A, photo courtesy of author

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